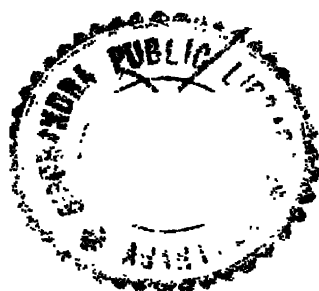


Georges Simenon

IN TWO LATITUDES

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH

BY STUART GILBERT



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THE MYSTERY OF THE 'POLARLYS'

CHAPTER I

The Evil Eye

It is a disease to which all ships are liable in all the Seven Seas, and its causes lie in that uncharted hinterland which men call Chance.

Though the first symptoms may look innocent enough, they can't escape a sailor's eagle eye. Suddenly, for no earthly reason, a stay snaps like a violin-string and slashes off the bos'n's arm. Or the ship's boy cuts his hand peeling potatoes in the galley, and next morning a festering finger makes him yell blue murder.

Or perhaps it's sheer bad seamanship, a ship's boat that falls foul of the stern.

Of course, one such isolated incident doesn't prove the Evil Eye at work. Still, somehow it rarely happens that there isn't a follow-up that night or the next day; disaster dogs disaster.

From now on things go from bad to worse, and there is nothing to be done about it. Gritting their teeth, the crew can only take misfortune as it comes. This is the moment that the engines, after running thirty years without a hitch, choose to conk out like an old coffee-mill.

In the teeth of all probability, weather-charts, precedents, you'll get three weeks of wind in a place where there shouldn't be a breath at that time of year.

The very first sea you ship carries a man over the side.

Dysentery breaks out in the fo'c'sle – and one's only too thankful that it isn't plague!

You may count yourself fortunate if the ship doesn't hit a sandbank which a hundred times before she's cleared successfully, and if, on entering harbour, she doesn't foul the breakwater.

Lying at Wharf 17, in one of the remotest and dirtiest docks of Hamburg, the *Polarlys* – as a notice-board affixed to the letter-box on the bridge announced – was due to sail at 3 p.m.

An hour or so before, Captain Petersen had his first, vague inkling that the Evil Eye was at work on board. Still, the short, stocky, bustling little skipper didn't look a superstitious sort of man by any means.

From nine in the morning he had been watching the cargo coming on board. A pea-soup fog of quite unusual virulence, icy cold and clogged thick with soot, had settled down on the docks. Of the city, nothing could be seen but a few wandering blobs of light – head-lamps of cars and trams – and a feeble glow from lighted windows.

It was near the end of February. The fog had coated hands and faces with a film of grey, half-frozen moisture. All ships under way were blowing their sirens, their stridence drowning the clank and rattle of the cranes.

The deck was deserted but for four men working at the forehold, steadying the hoists as they were lowered, unhooking crates and barrels.

There was nothing remarkable about the *Polarlys*, a thousand-ton coasting steamer, reeking of codfish, her deck always cluttered up with cargo, that plied between Hamburg and the extreme north of Norway, calling in at even the smallest ports on her way.

She took passengers as well as freight. Fifty first-class: as many thirds. Fruit, salt meat, and machinery were shipped to Norway. On the return voyage she carried thousands of barrels of cod and, from the Far North, bear-skins and seal-oil.

A passable climate up to the Lofotens. Then, of a sudden, ice-floes and the three months' night.

Norwegian officers. Fine fellows and good seamen, who knew in advance exactly how many barrels would be shipped by Olsen & Co at Tromsø; who had ordered the machine-tools loaded at Hamburg.

That morning Petersen had noticed that the last of his gold stripes was hanging by a thread, and had wrenched it off impatiently.

He had been short of a Third Mate. The Company had dispatched to him, with a letter of introduction, a Dutch lad of nineteen, who seemed no more than sixteen. A weedy-looking youngster, who had left the Delfzijl Training Ship only a week before. Pale and nervous, he had made his first appearance on the previous day, in uniform so immaculate that it took the Captain's breath away.

Clicking his heels together, he had said:

'Reporting for duty, sir.'

'All right, Mr Vriens,' the Captain had replied. 'But I shan't need you till to-morrow. You can stand off till then. As Third Mate you'll attend to the passengers when they come on board.'

Young Vriens had made off at once. He didn't return that night. At ten next morning the Captain saw him alight from a taxi, lurching a little. As he came up the gangway it was all he could do to keep his balance. His cheeks were bloodless, and there were dark rings round his eyes. He

approached the Captain with a hang-dog air.

Petersen turned his back on him, heard him click his heels before saluting, then stumble off towards his cabin.

'He has the devil of a hangover,' the steward informed the Captain an hour or so later. 'He asked for a cup of strong black coffee. Now he's lying flat on his bunk and can hardly speak. And you'd set his breath alight if you put a match to it!'

Nothing tragic about it, of course. Still, when a Captain and his officers are like a happy family, it's a blow having a young scallawag like that foisted on one. Especially when a Director of the Company has sent a special chit asking the Skipper to make things easy for him at the start, and calling him a 'promising youngster'!

As for Petersen, when he was nineteen he hadn't a brand-new certificate from a training ship in his pocket – but he'd been round the world three times. ...

Yes, he'd been right. They were in for a run of bad luck. As he walked round his ship, pipe in his mouth, hands in his pockets, he noticed a tall red-haired fellow lounging against the rail, rolling a cigarette. The man merely gave him a vague nod, then felt in his pockets for matches.

A 'dock-rat' evidently. One of those Nordic hoboes who are like no other vagabonds on earth.

A well-set-up fellow in the thirties. He hadn't shaved for a week, his cheeks were pale and cavernous, but for all that he looked robust.

He seemed quite at his ease as he puffed his cigarette. In an old Landwehr tunic, the buttons of which had been changed, he cut an almost soldierly figure.

'What are you up to there?'

The man jerked his chin in the direction of the Chief Engineer, who, as it happened, was just coming up the gangway.

'Hans,' the Chief Engineer explained, 'has one of his bouts of malaria. I've had to leave him on shore. I spotted that fellow on the wharf and took him on as trimmer. He looks as if he could do the work.'

'His papers?'

'Quite O.K.' grinned the Chief as he walked away. 'He's just come out of jail!'

'Another bad egg!' sighed Petersen.

That the man should be a jailbird didn't worry him particularly; one takes one's bunker-hands as one finds them. But there was something definitely unprepossessing about this fellow. And, as he paced the deck, the Captain watched him from the corner of an eye.

Much in the man's demeanour was common to most German tramps: self-assurance to the point of brazenness, a total lack of deference to superiors.

But this man had, as well, an ironic glint in his pale blue eyes. He knew he was under observation. But placidly he went on smoking, sometimes pausing to lick his cigarette-paper, then leaning back to watch the smoke curl up from his lips and mingle with the fog.

'What's your name?'

'Peter Krull.'

'You've been in jail. What for?'

'For damn-all - this last time anyhow. I was wrongly convicted.'

He spoke quite coolly, in a slightly affected voice. The Captain gave it up, moved hastily away. He had just heard a crash somewhere forward. A chain had broken and a

tractor in an enormous packing-case plunged eighteen feet from top to bottom of the hold.

'The first of the passengers appeared. All Petersen could see of him was a green suitcase and a grey overcoat. He called the steward.

'Where's Mr Vriens? The passengers are arriving. I hope he doesn't expect me to do his job for him.'

'It's quite all right, sir. He's in the saloon now, with the passenger-list and registers.'

That was so. With a racking headache, feeling more dead than alive, the youngster was carrying on. He greeted the passenger, copied into his register the entries on the man's passport, and allotted him a cabin.

As usual, the last two hours were chaotic. There was a rush of lorries bringing cargo; it was more than the cranes could cope with.

'Not our fault if you're late. What we can't get on board will stay behind.'

A familiar threat, which none of the stevedores took too seriously.

Followed by a porter, a lady passenger came up the gangway. A police officer buttonholed Vriens, who had overlooked an entry in an official form.

The fog had lifted somewhat, though it was still bad enough. On the stroke of three the dock was clear of shipping, but five minutes later, when the hawsers had been cast off, a big British tanker loomed out of the mist across the fairway. It was a near thing avoiding a collision.

Laden to the water's edge, a motor-barge came chugging through the gloom. Smoking a pipe, the bargee was leaning back against the tiller. The *Polarlys* just glanced along her side. The barge heeled over, half her

deck under water, then slowly righted herself and continued threading her way between the black hulls of tramps towering above her.

On the Elbe there was a regular procession. Three columns of ships, their sirens hurling insults at each other, were strung out irregularly in line ahead, the stern light of each barely visible from the next astern.

Faster ships kept trying to edge the others off the fairway. Sailing-ships drifted across the river, wraith-like fore-sails suddenly looming up less than a cable ahead.

Slow. Stop. Astern. Stop. Slow Ahead. Stop. The telegraph rang through the orders as the *Polarlys* made her way gingerly, by fits and starts, through the icy murk.

At seven they were still on the river and had not yet picked up the Cuxhaven light, beyond which lay the open sea.

Leaving his Second Mate with the pilot on the bridge, the Captain went below. He had another task before him – the duty of presiding at dinner in the saloon.

The gong was clanging up and down the passages with particular insistency. The steward knew from experience that on the first day passengers are apt to be unpunctual.

'I see you've laid five places,' Petersen remarked.

'There's one lady, sir, and three gentlemen. ... Ah, here's the lady.'

A jade cigarette-holder between her lips, she was strolling in, quite at her ease, dolled up as if she were on a luxury liner. One had the impression that she had nothing on under her black silk evening frock.

A striking little person, daintily built and supple, with a sensual appeal in all her movements. She was obviously determined to strike a note of originality, and had employed all the tricks known to beauty specialists to that end.

Pale and silken as a baby's, her hair was parted in the middle, falling along her cheeks in a single wave that emphasized the perfect oval of her face. Her eyes were very dark. And to make the contrast with her fair hair still more striking, the lashes had been darkened with mascara.

Her mouth was tiny; tiny, too, the young, tip-tilted breasts.

'Captain ...?' she began questioningly.

'Captain Petersen,' he introduced himself. He was conscious of his bedraggled appearance, and wished he'd brushed his hair on the way down. 'Won't you take a seat?' he added.

She sat down at once, choosing the place that fell to her, on the Captain's right.

A man came in and shook hands with Petersen, murmuring perfunctorily: 'Beastly weather, isn't it?'

The new-comer was Bell Evjen, manager of the Kirkenes mines. He visited London and Berlin every year on business and had travelled in the *Polarlys* the previous month. He inspected the girl with interest.

Another passenger came in, bowed punctiliously to each in turn, and took his seat without saying a word. A tall, youngish man with a shaven head. He had no eyelashes or eyebrows; thick-lensed glasses magnified his eyes out of all proportion.

'Bring the soup, steward.' The Captain noticed that one place was still vacant. 'After that, knock at the cabin door of our fourth passenger. He can't have heard the gong.'

A typical Scandinavian dinner. After soup and an entrée, a motley array of cold dishes – sausages, corned beef, pickled fish, and so forth – followed by stewed fruit and cheese.

'I've knocked at No 18, sir. There's no answer.'

'Tell the Third Mate to see what's the matter.'

Twice Petersen got up, hearing the engines slow down abruptly, and went on to the bridge. There was no change outside. Fog, cargo-boats crawling along in Indian file, the wail of sirens, short blasts, strident whistles.

Nobody talked in the dining-saloon. Between two courses the girl lit a cigarette with an exquisitely made gold lighter. Petersen surmised that she was German; likewise the passenger with the shaven head.

At last he rose from his seat.

'Coffee will be served in the smoke-room.' A ritual phrase. He'd said it at the beginning of every voyage during the last twelve years.

As he was standing at his cabin door filling his pipe, the girl walked past him and started climbing the companion-way leading to the smoke-room. Black silk stockings made her graceful legs still more alluring, and as she reached the top step there was a tantalizing gleam of white flesh above them.

'Well, Mr Vriens?'

The young man stiffened up at once. His lips were quivering. He looked as if he had suddenly been called on to face a dramatic crisis.

'I can't find our passenger, sir. But his luggage is in the cabin.'

'Who is he?'

'Ernst Ericksen, from Copenhagen. I saw him less than an hour before we sailed.'

'Was he a man in a grey overcoat, carrying a green suitcase?'

'Yes, sir that's him. I've looked everywhere.'

'He must have gone ashore at the last minute to buy a paper, and missed the ship.'

Ewjen and the bespectacled young man had gone to their cabins. The girl was by herself in the smoke-room. Suddenly Petersen heard a faint scream. A door banged. The black silk dress appeared at the top of the staircase.

'Captain!' She looked startled. She was pressing her hands to her breast, but trying to conjure up a smile.

'What's wrong?' he asked.

'It's silly of me to be frightened. Only it gave me quite a turn. I'd just gone into the smoke-room. There was a coffee-pot and cups on the table and I was pouring out my coffee. I heard a sort of rustling noise behind me. When I looked, there was a man sitting in a corner. I hadn't noticed him before. He must have taken fright, though I can't think why, for he jumped up and ran out at once.' *

'By which door?'

'That one. It leads on to the promenade-deck, doesn't it?'

'Had he a grey overcoat?'

'Yes. ... I couldn't help screaming. Why ever did he bolt like that?'

Somehow Petersen had the impression that the question was addressed more to Vriens than to himself. He turned to the young man.

'Look into this at once.' His tone was peremptory.

Vriens, however, showed some hesitation. It was particularly apparent as he walked past the girl.

'Don't be alarmed, Madame,' the Captain said. 'We'll soon find out what it all means.'

The ghost of a smile hovered on her lips. Then she said with a small, mischievous pout :

'I say, am I going to be all alone in the smoke-room?'

'Oh, the other passengers will be coming up presently.

'Don't you drink coffee, Captain?'

He could smell the scent she used, a subtle yet heady perfume. And he could have sworn he was conscious of the warmth emanating from her body. ... When, a few minutes later, she was pouring out the coffee, he couldn't take his eyes off her. Watching him from the corner of an eye, she noticed that his cheeks were flushed and he was straightening his tie.

Evjen came and joined them. The smoke-room was built to hold fifty people. Though it was comfortably furnished, the pale oak panelling made it seem rather bleak. When Petersen made a move, Evjen was sitting at a corner table studying some documents he had taken from a dispatch-case. In the opposite corner the bespectacled young man was reading the *Berliner Tageblatt*.

Midway between them, a pack of tiny cards spread fan-wise on the table, the girl was playing patience.

'Will you give me a light, Captain?'

He had come back from the door. As she pointed her long cigarette-holder towards him, leaning forward, Petersen had a glimpse of a young, creamy-white breast.

'Thanks. Are we getting near the open sea?'

'Yes, we shall be picking up Cuxhaven at any moment now. I must be getting on to the bridge.'

On a near view he noticed that, like Vriens, she had dark rings round her eyes and looked as if she hadn't slept for nights. Also like Vriens', her lips had a way of quivering for no apparent cause.

The Third Mate was waiting for him on the bridge. He looked as if he'd just been crying.

'Found him?'

'No, he must be hiding somewhere. I took three men to help me and we made a thorough search. ... But it's not that, sir.'

The glance Petersen gave him was far from encouraging.

'Well?' he asked gruffly.

'I want to tell you, sir, that ... that I'm most dreadfully sorry for —' His voice broke, tears came to his eyes. 'I assure you, sir, it was just bad luck. I'd never drunk so much before. Only, last night ... No, I can't explain. But I hate the idea that you —'

'That all?' The youngster looked so wretched that the Captain took compassion. 'Go to your cabin and sleep it off,' he added in a milder tone. 'You'll feel a lot better in the morning.'

'But I'm not drunk, sir. Please don't think I'm drunk.'

'That'll do. Off you go!'

Slipping on his sheepskin coat, Petersen took his stand beside the pilot. The green light of a tramp slipped past them, only a few yards to starboard.

'Not there yet?' the Captain asked.

The pilot pointed with his left hand, muttering 'Cuxhaven.'

He would leave the *Polarlys* once they drew level with the Cuxhaven light. Somewhere not far ahead a little motor-boat was looking out for him in the fairway.

The Captain gave him the time-honoured glass of schnapps in the charthouse, while exchanging a few commonplace remarks. He was filling a second glass when the engines slowed down, then stopped.

Low down in the water a speck of light glimmered through the fog. It seemed quite far off, but a moment later was seen to be an acetylene lamp, rapidly approaching

through the darkness. A small boat bumped against the hull, just below the Jacob's ladder. The men shook hands, wishing each other good night.

The steward was tidying up the saloon. The three people in the smoke-room were still seated at a distance from each other; evidently the ice had not yet been broken, though Evjen kept glancing in the girl's direction.

No sooner had the pilot set foot in his boat than he shouted :

'Hullo, Captain! Here's more trouble for you!'

Leaning over the rail, Petersen saw to his surprise a man in an ulster, carrying a large suitcase, on the motor-boat's deck.

'What's up?'

'You'll know in a moment.'

The man in the ulster had to be helped up the ladder. As he set foot on deck he cast a keen glance round him. Then he said in a low voice :

'I'm von Sternberg, Commissioner of Police. I couldn't make the boat at Hamburg, so I came along by car.'

A man in the early fifties. More even than the dark ulster which hung loosely round him like a conspirator's cloak, a pointed beard and bushy black eyebrows gave him a quaintly melodramatic air.

'I'll have my meals in my cabin,' he said as the *Polarlys* got under way again. 'If any of the passengers ask who I am ...'

'I've only three,' the Captain cut in.

'If any of the passengers ask about me, say I'm an invalid and have to stay in bed. Don't let them know who I am. Tell them I'm – let's say, Herbert Wolf, dealer in furs. I'll pay my fare.'

'Are you on duty?' Petersen felt his ill-humour increasing. 'Is there somebody on board whom ...?'

'*Polizeirat*, I said. Not Inspector.'

'Still ... ?' The Captain was vaguely aware that a *Polizeirat* ranks high in German officialdom; hunting down criminals was probably beneath his dignity. Still, the mere fact that this man was a police official – exalted or not – annoyed him. The fellow was evidently on duty and seemed inclined to throw his weight about. And Petersen did not like others to exercise authority on board his ship.

'All right, have it your own way,' he growled. 'I may as well tell you: if it's a man called Ernst Ericksen you're after, he's disappeared. He has paid for his passage and his things are in his cabin. But the man's not to be found.'

He shouted:

'Steward, show this gentleman to a cabin. You'll serve his meals there.' Turning to the man in the ulster, he added: 'That's right, Herr Wolf, isn't it?'

The Captain's watch began at six in the morning and it was high time for him to get to sleep. But as he lay on his bunk he found himself listening to all the sounds in the passage. He heard Evjen and the other man enter their respective cabins. Midnight came, but he hadn't yet heard the girl close her cabin door. He rang for the steward.

'Everyone gone to bed?'

'No, the lady's still up.'

'What? Still playing patience?'

'No, sir. She's walking on deck with –'

'With whom?'

'Mr Vriens.'

'So he had the nerve to go and haul her out of the smoke-room!'

DEATH OF A PASSENGER

'No, sir. He was in his cabin. The lady sent me to fetch him.'

The Captain rolled over heavily in his bunk, grunting some unintelligible remark. After waiting a moment, the steward left the cabin.

CHAPTER II

Death of a Passenger

NOT till nine next morning, when the Captain had been three hours on the bridge, did the first passenger show up on deck. It was a Sunday, but, in theory anyhow, life on board the *Polarlys* went on exactly as on weekdays. That morning, however, there was something vague yet quite perceptible in the air that made the day seem different.

In the small hours the thermometer had dropped below freezing-point. When, unwashed and unshaved, Petersen had donned his sheepskin coat and gone on duty, the air had been full of tiny, brittle particles of frozen mist, and at daybreak the deck had been coated with a film of glittering hoar-frost, that had rapidly vanished as the sun rose.

A curious sort of sun. Impossible to look directly at, yet it didn't warm, or even brighten the air. The breeze was chilly and the gleams on the waves had a harsh, metallic sheen.

The *Polarlys* was now off the north coast of Denmark, but too far out for land to be visible.

The first passenger to brave the icy morning air was the young man with the high-powered spectacles. He was in a pullover and knickerbockers, and had a sports coat over his arm.

'*Arnold Schuttringer, Engineer, Mannheim,*' Petersen had read when examining the passenger-list.

After making a round of the ship, Schuttringer had fixed his choice on the fo'c'sle. Putting his coat on the capstan, he embarked on a series of physical exercises with a look of grim determination on his face. Unhurried, methodically, he went through every movement of the course.

Now that he had taken off his glasses, his eyes were seen to be of normal size; it was the thick lenses that had made them seem so enormous.

The Captain was alone on the bridge. In a glass shelter behind him stood the quartermaster, both hands resting on the brass-bound wheel, his eyes glued to the compass.

A boy came from the galley and tipped a bucketful of potato peelings overboard. Catching sight of the young German, he stopped and for some minutes gaped at him, dumbfounded. Lying on the fo'c'sle, he was jerking himself up into the sitting position, then stretching himself full length on his back, with clockwork regularity, emitting a grunt of satisfaction with each movement.

Someone else was watching the performance with unconcealed interest, and Petersen frowned when he caught sight of him.

It was Peter Krull, the new trimmer, seated beside the fo'c'sle hatch, a cigarette dangling from his under-lip.

He had only two hours off. As a rule, the engine-room staff didn't think it worth while changing or washing for so short a break. Krull, however, had discarded his working clothes and put on his old Landwehr tunic. Unbuttoned, it disclosed a brawny chest covered with red hair. He was still wearing his canvas cap.

The place where he was sitting was not precisely out of

bounds; or rather, during the winter, when passengers were rare, such breaches of ship's etiquette were overlooked. Even more than on the previous day, the Captain was impressed, not to say embarrassed, by the man's demeanour.

It was a peculiar sort of embarrassment, such as one feels on seeming to catch, in the eyes of one of the lower animals, a glint of uncanny, ironical intelligence so disconcerting that one wants to look away.

Perhaps it was due to the man's air of almost brazen self-assurance, and his elegance, quite out of keeping with a bunker-hand, and a jailbird at that.

The man kept his eyes fixed on Schuttringer, who, however, didn't notice him until, the 'daily dozen' ended, he began putting on his coat. It seemed to the Captain that a look of annoyance crossed the young German's face; in any case he walked rapidly away without once turning his head.

A minute or two later Evjen came on to the bridge, as he did every morning when travelling on the *Polarlys*, and shook the Captain's hand.

'Had a good night?' the latter asked.

'Not too bad. ... I hear one of our passengers is ill.'

'That's so. We have an invalid on board,' the Captain muttered rather crossly. — 'Well, what is it, Mr. Vriens?'

The Third Mate had just come on the bridge, looking almost as much of a wreck as on the previous day. He said nervously:

'I was down in one of the holds just now, sir, and I heard a noise behind some crates. I'm almost sure I saw the missing passenger.'

There was a short silence. Evjen stared at the Captain, as if hoping he'd explain this cryptic piece of information.

'Now then, Vriens!' The young man gave a start and

gazed apprehensively at the Captain, who frowned severely at him. 'Tell me – what time did you turn in last night?'

'I ... I don't know, sir.'

'Well, I know. At two this morning you were still gallivanting about the deck. You didn't sleep the night before. And you'd spent the night before that in the train.'

'I don't follow, sir.'

'You're beginning to see things – that's all there is to it, unless I'm much mistaken. Still, you'd better have a hunt round for this mystery man of yours. Take as many men as you need and search the holds.'

So it was starting again – already. During his first hour on the bridge Petersen hadn't been able to take his mind off the curious happenings of the previous day. Still drowsy despite a mug of strong coffee, and shivering in the cold grey light of daybreak, he had had a sort of waking nightmare in which his Third Mate, the bunker-hand from Hamburg, the elusive Ericksen, and the girl in black had played fantastic parts.

Definitely something queer was happening, or about to happen, on board his ship. Otherwise a representative of the German police would hardly have raced all the way to Cuxhaven to catch the *Polarlys*; nor have taken such elaborate precautions for travelling incognito. And obviously the trouble that was brewing was of a pretty serious order – for Sternberg, as he himself had pointed out so bombastically, was no under-strapper, but a high official.

Was he after Ericksen? Still, when Petersen had mentioned the man's name not a muscle of his face had stirred. And he hadn't asked any questions.

Peter Krull?

The new trimmer was just moving off leth- to dyl

take his turn of duty in the bunkers.

Another puzzling thing. Why on earth should that girl have sent for Vriens in the middle of the night, and stayed on deck with him till two in the morning?

The Captain's pensive eyes settled on the tall, slimly built man beside him, who was gazing at the horizon.

'Had your breakfast, Evjen?'

'Not yet.'

'Know if our lady passenger's in the saloon?'

'She wasn't there when I went by. She's German, isn't she?'

'Yes. Her name's Katia Storm. But from her identity papers it seems she lives at Paris, in the Rue Vavin.'

'Is she getting off at Bergen?'

'No, Kirkenes. So's Schuttringer. This trip everybody's booked to Kirkenes, oddly enough. Usually you're the only passenger for so far north.'

'Is she on a pleasure trip?'

Clearly Evjen was interested in the young woman. He'd as good as admitted having looked into the saloon to see if she was there. Probably he'd postponed his breakfast in the hope of having it at the same time as she.

Looking down from the bridge, they saw her peeping round a doorway leading on to the deck. She seemed chary of coming out into the open, like someone who's just had a hot bath and fears a chill. She was wearing a pink-and-grey frock which, like the dress she'd worn at dinner, hailed unmistakably from the Rue de la Paix. She looked fresh as paint, sunlight glinting on the long ripples of her hair.

She glanced up at the bridge, noticed the two men, gave them a smile, and walked towards them.

'Good morning, Captain.'

On Evjen she bestowed a slight, more formal nod.

'We'll have fine weather, won't we?'

'Let's hope so.'

The steward popped his head out of the doorway, cast a reproachful glance towards them, implying: 'Are you going to keep me hanging about all the morning, to serve your breakfasts?'

Murmuring some vague remark, Evjen went down from the bridge. Petersen observed his movements as he gradually edged his way towards Katia, who was watching the seagulls skimming the waves alongside.

And at that moment, suddenly, for no apparent reason, the Captain became conscious of an appalling sense of emptiness. Cloudless but ashen grey, the sky was empty. Empty the ship, on which people were moving like aimless, listless shadows of themselves. And in himself, too, emptiness. ... Then it struck him that he was waiting for something – though what it was he hadn't an idea.

Three sailors, accompanying Vriens, came from the forehold.

'Found anyone?'

'No.'

Only to be expected. The hold was stowed right up to the hatch with packing-cases of all shapes and sizes, and they couldn't be shifted, as they'd been carefully arranged in order of the ports of call. Down there a man could easily lie low for several days.

Of a sudden, as it seemed, the deck was empty. Evjen and Katia were presumably in the saloon. Vriens had retired to the officers' quarters. Only the cook's boy came on deck now and again to throw some refuse overboard.

Two hollow hours went by, two hours spent in gazing

at the grey horizon, then at the compass, then back again at the horizon. Meanwhile, however, Petersen's imagination was at work, building fantastic theories to account for Sternberg's presence.

The ship's bell rang. The watch had changed. It was the Third Mate's turn for duty on the bridge. He stood stiffly to attention in his immaculate new uniform, too thin for the time of year in these Northern latitudes; a brand-new cap-badge glinted in the morning light.

The Captain looked him up and down, had half a mind to give him another talking-to, but merely muttered grumpily:

'Keep her on her course. Nor'-Nor'-West.'

He spent a full hour washing and dressing. On his way to the cabin he had seen his three passengers in the smoke-room: Evjen and Katia at the same table, Schuttringer in a corner turning the leaves of an illustrated guide-book he had found on the radiator.

On leaving his cabin the Captain lingered some moments in the port corridor, the only one in use. The first, and largest, cabin was his; it had an alcove which served as his office. After that came No 18, allotted to the mysterious Ericksen, who apparently preferred to travel as a stowaway. Then Nos 20, 22, and 24, occupied respectively by Katia Storm, Arnold Schuttringer, and the German official. The other cabins were empty. At one end of the passage a small brass plate indicated the position of the bathrooms and lavatories.

The Captain entered the dining-saloon, where the steward was laying the tables.

'Has Herr von Stern - I mean No 24, Herr Wolf, rung for you yet?'

'No, sir.'

'Lunch ready?'

'Just coming, sir.'

The steward set the napkins in their places, then picked up his gong and went out. The Captain heard it booming outside the smoke-room door.

A ray of sunlight streaming through a porthole lit up the tiny house-flags planted on each table.

Freshly shaven, still faintly redolent of soap, Petersen was wearing a thick suit which made him seem bulkier than usual, almost ungainly.

Resting his hand on the back of his chair, he waited till everyone was seated. Evjen and the girl came in together, engaged in a conversation about the relative merits of winter sports at Chamonix and in the Tyrol. Schuttringer had exactly the same expression as when, earlier in the morning, he had been at his physical exercises.

Before sitting down, the Captain cast a glance over his shoulder towards the corridor, with a sudden feeling that something was amiss. Later on he was to recall the vague sense of apprehension that came over him at that moment.

Only a second or two later everyone heard a curious cry, beginning as a stifled groan and ending in a high-pitched scream. Exactly the cry of a dying man.

Katia swung round towards the Captain. Evjen, who was saying something to her, stopped short in the middle of a phrase. Schuttringer replaced on the table the napkin he had just picked up, and asked :

'What's happening?'

Petersen got up and walked to the door. He had a glimpse of the steward's white coat at the end of the passage. The man was cowering against the wall just opposite the

German police official's cabin, the door of which stood open. Doubled up grotesquely, as if he were trying to push the wall away from him, he was covering his eyes with the crook of his arm. It was he who had screamed. But he was incapable of uttering another sound. His legs were giving way beneath him.

The Captain ran up the passage. At the cabin door he halted, clenching his fists, a grim look on his face.

Hadn't he suspected something of this sort?

The counterpane had slipped off the bed on to the floor. The mattress was askew, the sheets rucked up and stained with blood. One, rolled into a ball, lay on Sternberg's face; it seemed to have been used as a gag.

His pyjama jacket was unbuttoned; in the centre of his chest were two or three big gashes and the marks of blood-stained fingers.

One bare foot protruded over the side of the bunk. Petersen didn't need to touch it to make sure the man was dead. The steward had not moved. His teeth were chattering; he persisted in keeping his arm over his eyes. The passengers filed up the passage uncertainly, Evjen leading.

'What's wrong?' he asked.

The Captain noticed that the girl, who hadn't yet seen the body but had probably had a glimpse of the blood-stained sheets round the corner of the door, was nervously clutching Evjen's arm.

And at the same moment he had an impression that Schuttringer, in spite of his spectacles, didn't see quite clearly. The German walked straight up to the open door, paused for a moment on the threshold, knitting his brows, then asked :

'Who is it?'

'Don't be alarmed,' said Evjen, patting Katia's hand. 'But don't stay here.'

It was obvious that she was on the brink of a nervous breakdown and rapidly losing control.

'Why don't you take her away, damn it?' the Captain flung at Evjen as, pushing Schuttringer aside, he entered the cabin. 'You too, Herr Schuttringer, don't hang about; I want the passage clear.'

The door at the far end, leading to the kitchen, had opened, and puzzled faces could be seen peering round it, but no one dared as yet to make a move. The Captain turned to the steward:

'Come into the cabin.'

'Oh no, sir!' the man wailed. 'Please don't ...'

The Captain caught the man by the arm, swung him round into the cabin, kicked the door shut. All so automatically that a minute later he couldn't remember how he had done it.

'Did he ring for you?'

'No, sir. But when you ... when you mentioned him, I thought perhaps I'd better knock at his door. It was getting late and I hadn't heard him moving. As there wasn't any answer I opened the door quietly. ... Do please let me go away, sir. Oh ... !' He gave another little whinnying scream; his hand had brushed the dead man's foot.

'All right. You can go. Send -'

'Who, sir?'

'Wait a bit.' He pondered. Whom could he call in? There was no one else in authority on board. 'No,' he said at last, 'don't send anyone. Shut the door as you go out.'

The corpse didn't frighten him in the least. Indeed, finding that the protruding foot hampered his movements in

the narrow cabin, he pushed it on to the bed beside its fellow.

Just to make quite sure, he put his hand on Sternberg's chest. It was stiff already, and cold as ice. Evidently the crime had taken place in the course of the night. Not a drop of blood that was not clotted.

Sternberg's suitcase had been removed from the rack and was lying open on the floor. Its contents were scattered over the carpet.

Some shirts and vests, a complete change of clothes, stiff collars, ties. A pair of patent-leather shoes.

As far as possible, Petersen refrained from handling anything. Yet he couldn't bring himself to leave the cabin, convinced that the murderer must have left some trace. No weapon was to be seen. But, on moving the pillow a little to one side, he saw some French and German newspapers tucked under it.

There must have been a struggle. Otherwise it would not have been necessary to cover Sternberg's face with a sheet rolled into a pad. The red finger-prints on his chest seemed to have been made by the man himself in his death-agony. His fingers were smeared with clotted blood.

The aspect of the cabin and the body gave an impression of extreme ferocity – also of a certain amateurishness, not to say bungling, on the murderer's part. There must have been a terrific struggle. The dead man was robust and had put up a good fight when the other man had attacked him in bed. The murderer, while trying to stifle his victim's cries, had gone on slashing blindly at his chest.

Nothing had been heard. The passengers in the neighbouring cabins professed to have slept soundly all night.

The dead man's coat was hanging on a peg. Petersen ran

his hand through the pockets. They were empty, but in the ulster he found a wallet. It contained five thousand marks, visiting cards bearing Sternberg's name, some letters, a railway pass for all the German lines.

Finally the Captain discovered in a side-pocket the photograph of a girl of about fifteen, with big black eyes and curly, almost fuzzy hair.

He had not thought of closing the dead man's eyes. He felt uncertain whether or not to cover the body with a sheet.

On leaving the cabin he found Evjen and Schuttringer still in the passage. Both looked up questioningly as he came out.

'I've nothing to tell you,' he said. 'We shall be at Stavanger by midnight and I shall report the matter to the police. Where's Fräulein Storm?'

'In her cabin. She said she wanted to be left alone.'

He was in half a mind to follow her example and retire to his cabin, but thought better of it. Tossing the wallet and newspapers on to his bunk as he passed, he returned to the dining-saloon.

After some moments the other two men joined him there.

The steward had not got over his shock and served the meal with hands that trembled every time he handed a dish; he seemed completely dazed.

They ate perfunctorily, no one venturing to speak. Before the meal was over, Petersen got up abruptly and left the saloon; it had just struck him he had forgotten to wash his hands.

CHAPTER III

The Murder in the Rue Delambre

PETERSEN could read English and German with ease. He was, however, less at home in French, and, as it happened, the only news-item which might have some bearing on Sternberg's mission on board was in the French newspaper he had discovered under the dead man's pillow. Still, with the aid of a dictionary, he managed to make out what it was about.

The newspaper in question was the *Journal* of February 17. The *Polarlys* had sailed at 3 p.m. on the 19th, about the time when a French daily of the 17th would be on sale in Hamburg.

'*A Crime in Montparnasse,*' the caption ran. With a subtitle: '*Another Dope Tragedy.*'

The light in the porthole had gone a sickly green and, glancing out to sea, the Captain noted that a fog was rolling up. Before nightfall it would be as dense as on the previous afternoon. After listening for a moment to the hum of the engines, he sat down at his desk.

On the wall facing him was an enlarged photograph of his wife, a healthy-looking, jovial woman, not without a certain homely charm. Under it was a snapshot of himself playing with his two children in a bungalow garden, on the slopes of the hills overlooking Bergen.

As he hunted up in the dictionary the French words he didn't understand he repeated them *sotto voce*, with quaint mispronunciations:

'A tragic incident has once again thrown a lurid light on

the deplorable habits of the international colony whose Mecca is Montparnasse, and whose practices, with some honourable exceptions, are a blot on the fair name of our city of Paris.

'At 19A Rue Delambre, within a stone's-throw of certain world-famous caravanserais where from dawn till dusk you may hear conversations carried on in every language of the world, a painter from Munich, Max Feinstein by name, has for several years been occupying a ground-floor studio with a private door on to the street.

'Feinstein, who has a certain notoriety in "artistic" circles, is a great traveller. Every winter he spends some months on the Riviera or at some Adriatic coastal resort.

'On these occasions he usually hands over his key to a friend, who during his absence has the run of the studio.

'When he left Paris early this year he told the concierge that friends of his would be using the studio occasionally, and asked her to tidy it up after their visits.

'As already stated, the premises have a private entrance. At the end of a small alcove (converted by Feinstein into a bathroom) is a door which formerly led into the concierge's quarters, but is now nailed up.

'Through this door, however, it is still possible for her to hear what is going on in the studio, and we have thus been enabled to glean some idea of what took place on the eventful night of Sunday last.

'The concierge has repeated to our representative the statement which she made to the police, and we give it in her own words :

' "I have nothing to say against Monsieur Feinstein. He is a good tenant and unusually quiet for an artist; his only fault is that he is too kind-hearted. Often I've known him

bring to the studio a fellow-countryman in distress and put him up for weeks on end, letting him sleep on the sofa.

“It was the first Sunday after he’d gone that for the first time I heard people in his room. As I knew about the key, I didn’t worry. There must have been six of them at least, including two or three women. Everyone was talking German, and I heard champagne corks popping.

“Next morning I went to tidy up. I’d half a mind to write to Monsieur Max about it. They’d made the studio into a regular pigsty. Broken glasses and bottles all over the place, the bath-tub full of dirty water, and they’d wiped their hands on the curtains. Some things I saw there don’t bear mentioning!

“For some weeks after that nobody came. Then I heard voices again – on a Wednesday I think it was. This time there were only two, a man and a woman, and they stayed the night in the studio. Early in the morning there was such a smell of ether coming under the door into my room that I thought of getting up to tell them to clear out. But I’ve always been one for minding my own business, so I let them be.

“Last Sunday afternoon at five or six was the last time there were people at the studio. I had my sister-in-law staying with me and I didn’t pay much attention. But I noticed the same voices as I’d heard on the first Sunday.

“They must have left very late that night. Next morning we had workmen in, doing repairs in the yard, so I hadn’t time to pop into the studio. And Tuesday was my day off.

“To tell the truth, I knew I’d find the place so filthy I couldn’t bring myself to start the job of cleaning it. So I kept on putting it off.

“You’ve heard the rest from the police. I went into the

studio on Thursday, and rushed out again at once. I grabbed the first man I met by the arm; I was that scared I didn't know what I was doing. I couldn't get a word out.

"I'd seen a naked woman lying on the bed. Quite young she was, and must have been quite a pretty girl, only her face and body had gone sort of mottled with bluish spots.

"Glasses of champagne and whisky were lying about everywhere. There was a glass syringe on the floor; I trod on it without noticing. But the police doctor managed to find out what was in it, so I've heard.

"Wasn't it a low-down trick, sir? When they saw she was dead they just bolted, leaving her lying there all by herself."

Petersen gazed for a moment at the picture of his home in Norway, gay as a doll's house with its brightly painted woodwork. He felt revolted, like a man who comes in contact for the first time with some particularly foul disease.

But he continued reading:

"The concierge's last remark gives an adequate summary of the case as it now stands. So far the police enquiry, while it has brought out some facts relating to the dead girl, has failed to throw any light on the identity of the criminal.

"At the *post-mortem* examination the body was found to be that of a healthy girl of about twenty. On the night she died she had imbibed a considerable quantity of alcohol and drugs. Death, however, was due to an injection of morphia, and the mark of a hypodermic syringe was found on her left thigh.

"Her photograph was published in the evening papers yesterday, and she had now been identified as Marie Baron, a shop-assistant at a draper's in the Rue de Clichy. She lived by herself in lodgings in the Boulevard des Batignolles.

The body was identified at the Medico-Legal Institute by a girl friend of the deceased.

'This friend made a statement to the effect that she had arranged to go with Marie Baron, as they usually did on Sundays, to dance at Luna Park. Last Saturday, however, Marie told her she had met some "awfully nice boys" and was going with them to Montparnasse instead.

'It is only too easy to picture what took place. A party of drug-addicts in quest of new sensations thought they would give an additional "kick" to their orgy by including in it a girl who had never indulged in such practices; they picked on Marie Baron as their victim.

'The night began with liberal potations of champagne and whisky, and probably some sniffs of heroin. It is possible the girl put up some resistance to their proposals. One thing anyhow is certain: given her inexperience, she could not possibly have made the injection in her thigh herself.

'Dr Paul declares that death was due to heart-failure, and practically instantaneous.

'The other members of the party took fright. But it is noteworthy that before leaving they were careful to see that no clues to their identity remained on the premises. Which goes to show that some of them, anyhow, had kept their wits about them and cannot plead irresponsibility.

'So far, enquiries amongst the foreign colony of Montparnasse have proved unavailing. Until Feinstein is traced it is impossible to ascertain to whom he lent the key of his studio. Telegrams sent to Nice and Cannes have unfortunately failed to reach him. We are informed that a week ago he started off by sea for one of the seaside resorts (it is not known which) on the Adriatic.

'There is no feature of this sordid case that is not

particularly distressing. We can picture the horror and dismay of Mlle Baron's aged parents on learning of their daughter's tragic end under such painful circumstances.

"The police are prosecuting their enquiry with the utmost vigour. It is to be feared, however, that by the time the identity of the culprits is ascertained they will be found to have decamped."

Petersen glanced at the headlines in the German newspaper, but saw nothing bearing on the case. He had gone quite pale; his feeling of disgust was physical as much as mental.

Since he was thirteen years of age he had been at sea. He had witnessed savage fights in dockland taverns, and once a sailor, half-seas-over, had described to him his crimes in lurid detail.

After he had got his master's ticket the police had several times arrested men on board his ship. On the first occasion the criminal had been a notorious international crook; on another a Pole, who in a fit of jealousy had strangled his wife and his two children.

But these experiences had left him cold, or almost so. As a good Protestant he had always recognized the human soul as a battlefield of good and evil instincts.

What he now felt was a sort of nausea. He had never been to Paris. He tried to picture this district of Montparnasse to which the newspapers had referred: the studio, the scene of wild debauch, the naked body on the sofa.

It was some time before he began to wonder if this Parisian crime had any relation to Sternberg's death. But once the idea had entered his mind he came, almost unconsciously, to the conclusion that the two crimes were in fact connected.

Unsummoned, pictures rose before his eyes of the man in the grey overcoat of whom he'd had a glimpse, and who now was skulking somewhere in the ship; of the fireman Peter Krull, with his queer, twisted grin; of Vriens with his puffy eyelids and curiously jumpy manner; of Schuttringer with his goggle eyes and hairless cranium.

And uncomfortably he remembered how he'd felt the blood rising to his cheeks at the sight of Katia's shapely legs, and ruefully admitted to himself that on at least two occasions, in passing, he'd deliberately brushed against her with a sort of tentative caress.

Most disturbing of all was the feeling that somehow the bottom had dropped out of his private universe, the comfortable world he knew. The feeling was so disconcerting that he buried his head in his hands, and started violently when some minutes later he heard a peremptory clangour — Four Bells of the first dog watch.

Even his ship looked different. No sooner had he left his cabin than he cast a suspicious glance along the passage, and noticed that the steward was loitering beside his door.

'Where are they?' he muttered.

'Who, sir?'

'The passengers. Mr. Evjen? Herr Schuttringer?'

'Up in the smoke-room.'

'And the German girl?'

'She's gone up and joined them.'

He tramped up the stairs, opened the smoke-room door and halted on the threshold, frowning. The passengers were seated at the same places as before, Evjen and Katia with a bottle of mineral water on their table, Schuttringer in a corner playing chess by himself.

The lamps had just been switched on. Three faces turned towards the Captain. Evjen, who was on easier terms with him than the others, started to say something.

But Petersen turned on his heel, slammed the door, and went up to the bridge. There he saw Vriens's spare form outlined against the dusk; he had just turned over to the Second Mate.

Why, coming up soundlessly behind him, did Petersen suddenly lay his hand on the youngster's shoulder? Vriens started, trembling violently, and swung round at once, a look of actual panic on his face.

'Cap - Captain,' he stammered, trying to recover his self-control.

'What's wrong? You look as if you'd seen a ghost!'

'I'm all right, sir. Only I ... I wasn't expecting ...'

'Off you go now!'

'Is it true, sir, we've a dead man on board?'

'Yes. But that's no concern of yours. Didn't you hear me tell you to leave the bridge?'

His tone was so harsh that the Second Mate, who had known him for years, looked round in surprise. He was a strapping fellow of about thirty, who hadn't got a master's ticket but was working his way up, and was sure of getting command of a coaster somewhere about forty-five. He lived with his mother at Trondhjem.

'A nasty thing to happen in the ship,' he remarked when Vriens had gone. 'We've got to nab this rascal who's in hiding somewhere on board.'

'Where are we?'

They leaned over the chart. Petersen said fretfully:

'With this damned fog we shan't make Stavanger before one in the morning. And we've got to sail at two-thirty. If

only we'd wireless! They've been promising us it for the last two years!'

He was feeling restless, at a loose end. He'd never felt like that before when on his ship. To get back to his cabin, he had to go along the promenade-deck, past the smoke-room portholes. Glancing in, he noticed that Katia was no longer there.

He didn't utter a word as he sat down to dinner. His eyes kept wandering towards the girl's empty chair.

'Is she having dinner in her cabin?' he asked the steward.

'No, sir. And she isn't in it.'

His brows were deeply furrowed. Suddenly he rose and walked rapidly for'ard, towards the officers' quarters.

He was almost at Vriens's cabin when the door opened and Katia came rushing out. She stopped dead on seeing the Captain only a yard away, and for a moment seemed panic-stricken. But she quickly recovered herself.

'Dinner hasn't begun yet, has it? Were you looking for me?'

'No. But they're waiting for you in the saloon.'

He pretended to have something to see about in the Second Mate's cabin. But the moment Katia was out of sight he opened Vriens's door. The young man was lying on his bunk, his arms crossed above his face. As the Captain entered he sprang to his feet with awkward haste, trying to rub the tear-stains from his cheeks.

'Captain!'

'That's all right. Lie down again.'

Gloomier than ever, Petersen went out; he couldn't make head or tail of it. In the saloon he found the German girl at her place, chattering away volubly in a shrill voice. She kept turning in his direction.

But as he feigned to think her remarks were not intended for him, and Schuttringer remained aloof as usual, she was constrained to address her remarks to Evjen.

She was making enquiries about the halt at Stavanger.

'Do you think the police will hold us up? It seems so silly! Surely if the ship were thoroughly searched it should be possible to lay hands on this man — what's his name? — Ericksen. Perhaps that isn't his real name.'

The Captain was conscious that Evjen, a married man, at whose house he was a constant guest while the *Polarlys* was in Kirkenes harbour, was feeling rather uncomfortable and would have preferred the conversation to become general. ...

Five miles out, a pilot came on board from a little cutter. The fog was so dense in these reef-strewn waters that all hands were put on watch. Lining the fo'c'sle head, they shouted warnings to the bridge.

In the gloom the *Polarlys* showed up like a faintly luminous cloud. But from the bridge one couldn't even see the stern.

The siren bayed incessantly; they were trying to locate another steamer the blasts of whose siren could be heard at intervals, like far-off banshee wailings. The passengers had their faces glued to the smoke-room portholes. Presently they saw the ship ringed round by little yellowish blurs of light. And a moment later they heard voices quite near, incredibly distinct.

By the look of things they might have been a thousand miles from shore. Even the beam of the lighthouse failed to pierce the fog. Actually they were ten yards from the wharf and sailors were already throwing the heaving-lines ashore.

A drizzle had set in. Drifts of half-melted snow lay in every cranny of the wharf.

The moment the gangway was in place some twenty men dashed across it to the open holds and started unloading. A police officer in uniform saluted Petersen and asked : 'Many passengers this trip?'

Nothing could be seen of the town sprawling on the mountain-side except the beginning of a steep street, wooden houses painted green and brown, lit up by the street lamps.

'Go and fetch the Superintendent at once,' the Captain said. 'There's been a crime on board.'

It was past one in the morning. Norwegian closing regulations are strict; there was not a single café open.

Nor was there anyone about except the dockers, who had now rigged the derricks and were hauling crates out of the holds.

For a moment the constable seemed at a loss. Then he decided to waken the proprietor of a neighbouring hotel and ring up headquarters.

On the wharf the fog seemed to be getting thinner, as though the dockers hurrying to and fro were tearing rifts in it; one was beginning to have glimpses of people and warehouses.

But on the waters of the harbour there lay a thick yellow blanket of fog, out of which came sudden icy gusts of wind. It was impossible to see the surface of the water even quite close alongside.

It happened quite suddenly. Across the rattle of pulleys and the thuds of bulky packing-cases landing on the stone-paved wharf there could be heard distinctly the splash of some heavy object falling into the water.

Stepping quickly over a row of kegs, Petersen hastened

to the side. There he found Vriens leaning over the bulwark. The young man gasped excitedly :

'Quick! He's down there. I saw him jump.'

'Who?'

'The man in grey. Ericksen.'

The police officer couldn't make head or tail of it. Bending above the dark, fog-bound water the Captain could neither see nor hear anything. He turned to Vriens.

'Are you sure you saw him?'

A docker at work six yards away put in a word.

'Summut fell into the water. But I couldn't make out rightly what it was.'

'What I saw was something grey,' the Third Mate repeated.

'Lower a boat. Look sharp about it!'

But there wasn't time, so Petersen jumped on to the wharf, ran down a flight of stone steps, and tumbled into a row-boat moored alongside.

The police officer scrambled in beside him. The men working at the hatches had all run to the bulwarks and were looking over the side. Amongst them the steward's white coat was well in evidence.

There was a splash of oars. The Captain shouted :

'A light!'

Someone on deck let down a lantern on a rope. But through the trailing wisps of fog nothing could be seen but a black, gently heaving expanse of water.

Had the man had time to swim away and climb one of the ladders clamped to the wall?

The Captain was plying the oars with little angry jerks. The badge on the constable's shako glinted as he bent over the side and plunged his gaze into the depths.

The black bulk of the *Polarlys* loomed above them like a monstrous drop-scene dappled with little zones of light. In one of these Petersen saw Vriens, hanging over the rail; Katia's hand was resting on his shoulder.

Petersen muttered an imprecation. The policeman said: 'I can't hear a sound. He must have gone to the bottom like a stone.'

'So you say. That must be it.'

Taken aback by the Captain's surly tone, the police officer cast a quick glance at his companion. A queer sort of chap, he was thinking. Jumpy. Doesn't seem to know his own mind.

The Superintendent of Police arrived in a car. He was wearing black trousers and a fur-lined coat over his pyjamas. A sparely built, aristocratic-looking man, with a distinguished manner befitting his appearance.

'I hear there's been a crime ...' he began.

Petersen hurried him off to his cabin, after telling the constable in uniform to make sure that no one went ashore.

His tone was so authoritative that it seemed as if he were conducting the enquiry.

'Sit down. I'll state the facts as briefly as I can. We're due to sail at two-thirty. It's past two already. We have twenty-five ports to call at on our way north, and I've got to keep to my time-table. People will be waiting for us all the way up the coast at the scheduled time. I'm carrying their mail and provisions, as well as machinery and newspapers. Only – I've a murdered man, as well, on board.'

The more agitated he became, the less he showed it. He didn't gesticulate, his face was calm; only his voice betrayed the rising tide of his emotion.

The Superintendent remained seated while, pacing up

and down the cabin, the Captain related what had taken place since leaving Hamburg. He also gave a summary of what he had read in the French newspaper, which was still lying on his desk.

Twice he broke off and went on deck to make sure the unloading was progressing and tell the men to hurry up.

'Well, what do you propose to do about it?' he concluded, and slumped down wearily on his bunk, cupping his chin with his hand.

The Norwegian coast consists of a long mountain range, spanned by two or three main roads only, and then only in the south. After Trondhjem there are no roads worth mentioning, still less any railways. So communications are kept open by coasters such as the *Polarlys*, which also bring the mails and essential foodstuffs.

In the north, for instance, the staples are codfish and reindeer. If no ships call, the inhabitants are cut off completely from the outside world, sandwiched between an impassable mountain range and the turbulent Atlantic.

Which is why the Coastal Navigation Companies are subsidized by the Government and enjoined to keep to time.

The Superintendent looked worried.

'You say this man Ericksen has just thrown himself overboard?'

'What I said,' the Captain amended, 'was that something dropped into the water and my Third Mate says he saw a greyish object falling.'

'Well, it comes to the same thing, doesn't it?'

'That's for you to decide.'

'What about the identification papers of the other passengers?'

'They were checked at Hamburg by the German police, as they always are.'

'I'll have another look at them. I can only see one course open: to ring up Oslo. It'll take twenty minutes to get through. Meanwhile a doctor will come and inspect the body, and a police photographer will take photos of the cabin and see if he can find any finger-prints. We'll study the passports carefully. And, of course, the ship must be thoroughly searched. That will delay you for an hour or so, but you can easily make it up. Everything seems to point to the fact that this man Ericksen committed the murder, so if nothing comes out against the other passengers, I certainly shouldn't see my way to detaining them.'

He rose with a sigh. It sounded simple enough, but he knew there was small chance of its proving so.

As he left the ship he, too, warned the constable:

'See that no one goes ashore.'

The dockers were unloading the last crates, watched by the steward, who seemed at a loss what to do with himself, and to prefer risking a cold on deck to staying in the neighbourhood of the cabins.

The car roared away into the night. Within less than a quarter of an hour six men in uniform marched on board. Some entered the fore-hold, some the after-hold, and began plying the beams of their electric torches on every nook and cranny.

A small cap like a jockey's adorning his hairless head, Schuttringer was striding briskly up and down the deck, like a man set on keeping in training.

Evjen, a strained look on his face, kept trying to button-hole the Captain and find out what was happening.

Petersen went aft. Here the deck was in almost complete

darkness. He heard whispers behind the hand-wheel, then the sound of a kiss.

Creeping forward, he had a glimpse of two shadowy forms locked in each other's arms. Their faces, mouth to mouth, made a white patch in the darkness.

He didn't need to see their features: Vriens's new gold stripes glittered and, resting on his shoulder, Katia's bare arm showed white against the dark blue uniform.

CHAPTER IV

The Search at Stavanger

WHEN passengers and officers had mustered in the smoke-room, the Superintendent treated them to a little speech delivered in the politest of tones.

'Ladies and gentlemen, all of you are aware of the tragic event which explains my presence on board this ship. So far, everything goes to show that the criminal isn't amongst you, and that he jumped overboard when the ship came alongside the wharf. All the same, there are certain formalities that have to be complied with – but let me assure you I'll do my best to make them as little vexatious as I can. Please don't take them to mean that any one of you is under suspicion. Their only object is to enable the *Polarlys* to continue on her voyage without delay. Now, will each of you be kind enough to go to his cabin and stay there for the inspection we are about to make.'

Meanwhile an Inspector, after addressing the crew rather more briefly, had already started searching bunks, ditty-bags, and sea-chests.

The tackle had ceased working. The police had only to give their authorization and the ship could get under way at once.

Two police officers had noted the exact position of the corpse in No 24 and taken several photographs. The body had been carried away on a stretcher into the darkness.

The Superintendent had shown the utmost tact, his manner had been perfect. Nevertheless a constrained look settled on all faces when he ceased speaking. Even Evjen and the Second Mate had a slightly hang-dog air. For — there was no getting away from it — since the author of the crime hadn't been traced, any one of them might be the criminal.

Each, while trying to seem natural, was on his guard. Most embarrassed was probably Petersen, for the Superintendent had asked him to be present when he searched the cabins. He insisted on his own being searched first, so as to set an example, and opened his trunk, pulled out the drawers of his desk, and even turned up his mattress.

'Really, Captain ...!' the police officer protested.

It was Evjen's turn next. They found him standing at the foot of his bunk. He behaved exactly as a traveller does when undergoing an inspection by the Customs. He had taken his suitcases down from the rack and unlocked them. He conjured up a smile now and again, especially when producing such small, unlikely objects as a clarinet.

'I bought it for my kid, he's twelve years old. That little work-basket's for my daughter, she's rising seven. These are the latest gramophone records — I get a new batch every year in London. Some books. That? Oh, that's something my wife told me to buy — a bit of mackintosh sheeting for the latest arrival's cot!'

'Really!' protested the Superintendent. 'Please don't give yourself all this trouble.'

But Evjen persisted. He unfolded three lounge suits, a dinner jacket, some silk shirts marked with his monogram, his hotel bill at the Savoy, another headed *Majestic Hotel, Berlin*.

'Thanks, that's quite enough. Would you be so good as to hand your passport to the Inspector who's on deck. A mere matter of routine, of course. You don't suspect anyone, I suppose?'

'No, I don't,' Evjen replied somewhat curtly.

The next cabin was empty. Then came the cabin in which the missing passenger, Ericksen, had left his luggage.

'I'll take charge of it,' said the Superintendent. 'Have it sent on shore, please. Let's see. One suitcase only. An old suit. Two shirts ...'

Bare necessities. The garments, though well cut, were almost threadbare. There wasn't even an extra pair of shoes.

'Next, please.'

Katia had followed Evjen's example. Her possessions were spread out on the bunk. The police officer seemed shy about handling her frocks and lingerie, so she held them up herself, one by one. Her hands were trembling.

Petersen stayed behind the doorway. He felt abashed and at the same time haunted by a vague foreboding to which he could assign no cause. It was he who picked up from the floor a small mauve paper fan and read out in a low tone the name inscribed on it: *Krystall Palace, Hamburg*.

'My last night on shore,' Katia laughed. 'I felt like dancing, and dropped in at the *Krystall* for a bit.'

'By yourself?' the police officer enquired.

'Certainly. ... Why not?'

She had at least fifteen dresses, all exquisitely made and in perfect taste. And provocatively alluring undies.

Her dressing-case had solid silver fittings, and every feminine knick-knack scattered about the cabin was of the same quality. It was easy to see that all these articles hailed from luxury shops in the Rue de la Paix, Bond Street, or Unter den Linden.

Only one thing clashed: a trumpery tom-thumb umbrella of Belgian make. She giggled, then explained:

'I was caught in the rain at Brussels, so I went and got it at the first shop handy.'

'Do you live in Paris?'

'Paris, Berlin, Nice – I move about a good deal.'

'Do you know Max Feinstein, an artist?'

'No. Is he a fellow-countryman of mine? A Jew, I suppose?'

'When did you reach Hamburg?'

'On Thursday night. I'd been told a boat for Norway was leaving on Friday.'

'Had you come from Paris?'

'Yes. But I stopped on the way – for a week at Brussels and a couple of days in Amsterdam.'

She was obviously making an effort to seem at ease, and met the Superintendent's scrutiny without flinching. But in such circumstances the demeanour of the person being questioned counts for little; an innocent person often shows more signs of confusion than a guilty one.

The cabin reeked of scent, the floor was strewn with cigarette-ends. On the shelf stood a half-empty liqueur bottle.

'Thank you, Frau Storm.'

'Fräulein,' she corrected with a pout.

'Do you propose to stay some time in Norway?'

'Only a week or two. I want to have a look at Lapland.'

A question was hovering on the tip of Petersen's tongue: 'How much money have you with you?' But shyness prevented him from putting it.

The last visit was the shortest. Arnold Schuttringer had little luggage. Decent, but inexpensive clothes. Toilet articles such as one gets in chain-stores, most of them almost new. An outfit, in short, suitable for the journey.

With a rather sulky look on his heavy features, but placidly enough, he watched the Superintendent's activities. He didn't intervene in any way; his answers were brief and to the point. ...

'So it comes to this,' the Superintendent summed up. 'All the passports are satisfactory. I see no ground whatever for detaining any of the passengers. The murderer, my Inspector tells me, wore gloves, so there's no point in taking their finger-prints.

'The holds have been searched; nobody was there. All goes to show that this fellow Ericksen jumped overboard, in the hope, presumably, of swimming ashore.

'By the way, we can trust your Third Mate, can't we? Really we've only his word for it that the man jumped overboard.'

Petersen made no reply. It was past three. The police had ended their task. Nothing had come of it.

'I'll get in touch with the German police, have the dock dragged and search made in the town.'

The Superintendent adopted a confident, almost jaunty tone; inwardly he was feeling far from easy about the case.

'As I said, it's out of the question keeping your ship here till the enquiry's over. And as for detaining any of the passengers – well, they're all, if I may put it so, in the same boat.' He smiled. 'There's no reason to single out any one of them for detention. I'd have to arrest your crew and passengers *en bloc*!'

The Captain, who was looking glummer than ever, kept silence, merely giving a polite nod now and again when the Superintendent made a pause.

Tiny snowflakes were fluttering through the fog. Doors kept opening and closing, and icy draughts swept down the corridors.

'Anyhow, I'll leave one of my detective inspectors on board, if you don't mind. That'll relieve me, and you, of responsibility for anything that may transpire.'

At half-past three Petersen and the Superintendent were pacing the alleyway, while the crew were making ready to cast off. Shouldering black sea-chests, the two pilots who were to be on duty turn by turn during the voyage up the coast had come on board, swaddled in heavy furs, their wooden-soled sea-boots clacking on the deck.

There were still a few people hanging about the quay. An Inspector had gone off in the Superintendent's car to fetch some clothes for the voyage, and the ship couldn't sail till he returned.

Now that everything had been fixed up, the two men were keeping up a desultory conversation as they patrolled the deck.

'That lady passenger of yours must be having a great time – the only woman on board. Especially as she's so – how shall I put it? – so fetching. A quaint little thing, isn't she?'

The First Mate, as out of humour as his Skipper, was already at his post on the bridge. Leaning on the hand-rail, he was staring gloomily into the fog.

Evjen and Schuttringer had stayed in their cabins after the police inspection. Katia, however, could be seen across a smoke-room porthole. The long jade cigarette-holder well to the fore, she was dealing out her patience cards.

At last there came the purr of a motor. The car drew up, leaving two dark furrows in the level whiteness of the quay-side.

Seeing the Inspector coming up the gangway, the Superintendent took his leave, cheerfully remarking:

'Good-bye, Captain. Hope you'll have a pleasant voyage.'

The Captain scowled.

Three blasts of the whistle. An order shouted from the bridge. A clatter of footsteps on deck. A hawser splashed in the *Polarlys's* wake.

'The steward will show you to your cabin,' said Petersen to the Inspector, an amiable, meek-looking man in his thirties, much more like an office-clerk than a detective.

Then he started pacing the deck, at a loss for his next move. Twice he put his hand on the smoke-room door. Finally he started off towards the officers' quarters, intending to make sure that Vriens had turned in.

But just then the youngster walked by without noticing him and, after pressing his face to the smoke-room porthole, stepped inside.

It went against the Captain's grain to spy on anyone. Yet now he, too, peered through the porthole. He saw Katia look up and make some remark. The noise of waves against the bows was increasing and he couldn't hear a word; he could only see the movement of her lips.

Vriens sat down close beside her, and at once started talking excitedly; he seemed to be pleading with her.

As the tide of emotion rose, his expression became so agonized that it was positively painful to watch. The Captain could see his nerves were frayed to breaking-point. His face was working convulsively, he was quivering in every limb. He kept on shifting the position of his legs, gesticulating; his eyes moved restlessly from point to point.

To make things worse, he seemed to be suffering from a cold in the head. During the ten minutes he was talking to Katia he blew his nose violently half a dozen times.

Obviously she did not see him with the same eyes as the Captain. Of a sudden, while he was talking, she pressed her hand gently to his lips – a compassionate, almost mothering gesture – and, leaning forward, kissed his eyes.

Then she laughed. A curious laugh in which many emotions appeared to intermingle: affection and gentle mockery, passion and – to the Captain's thinking – a hint of panic.

When she rose, Vriens followed. Petersen saw them move away towards the cabins. He didn't follow, but listened. A door slammed, the sound of footsteps ceased. And he knew Vriens was in her cabin.

The steward was dropping with fatigue. All the same, he went to the smoke-room to empty the ashtrays, put the chairs back in their places, and switch off the lights.

He found the Captain stooping beside the chair where Katia had sat to pick up two slips of pink cardboard that had dropped from Vriens's pocket when he pulled out his handkerchief.

'It's a load off my mind, sir, now they've taken him away. It fair gave me the shudders every time I thought of

him down there. Did you notice how his mouth was open, sort of gasping?'

But Petersen didn't hear him. He was busy examining the pink slips, which proved to be cloakroom tickets from the *Krystall*. At last, with a sigh, he stowed them away in his wallet.

'Are you staying here, sir?' The steward sounded surprised.

'No. You can put out the lights now, and go to bed.'

'Do you think that man Ericksen really jumped overboard? Shouldn't wonder if he's still lying low somewhere on the ship.'

The Captain merely shrugged his shoulders and stepped out on to the deck. Glancing up at the bridge, he saw the glow of the First Mate's cigarette and, near him, the pilot's burly form, his face almost completely hidden by a big sealskin cap.

A small white light showed dimly through the haze; a fishing-smack most likely. The *Polarlys* passed so close that one could hear two men talking on the look-out thwart.

Never before had Petersen felt so dissatisfied with everything, himself included, or so baffled – yet he couldn't have explained why. It was rather like one of those incoherent dreams that come of overeating, when nothing really terrible happens, one runs no serious risk, yet somehow every object, each incident, seems sinister, dark with foreboding. The counterpane swells to a vast, stifling bulk. The dreamer feels himself lost in a hostile world, of which he can make nothing, and if he struggles to wake up, cannot quite bring it off.

The *Polarlys* had ceased to be the ship the Captain knew and loved. Even the presence of the Police Inspector on

board, mild and well-meaning though the fellow seemed to be, got on his nerves.

The ship was beginning to roll more heavily. They had left the narrows and she was now travelling at her normal speed, giving for safety's sake a blast of her siren every minute.

Now and again the white wings of a seagull streaked the surrounding darkness.

Suddenly Petersen turned on his heel and, stooping, entered the iron doorway leading to the engine-room. Below the ladders, in the harsh glare of unshaded lights, he saw the Chief Engineer busy checking the oil-pressure, while a man in blue dungarees dozed beside the telegraph-dial.

He climbed down the iron ladder. By way of greeting, the Chief barked at him :

'How's things on deck? Settling down after all this blasted fuss about that stiff?'

'Yes. All's quiet now.'

The Captain edged his way past the engines, which splattered him with flying drops of oil, and entering a still smaller doorway, emerged into the red glare of the stokehold.

Stripped to the waist, a man was shovelling coal. Without pausing to look round, he raised a black hand awkwardly to his grimy, sweating forehead.

Petersen continued on his way. He had to walk doubled up. Lumps of coal crunched under his feet. All at once he was sweating in every pore.

At last he reached the bunkers. Seated on a block of coal, a black-faced, unrecognizable figure was munching a hunk of bread and cheese. Without rising or saluting, the man watched the Captain approach.

It was Peter Krull. The ruddy glint of his beard showed through a coat of coal-dust. His pale eyes were twinkling more ironically than ever.

'Well, have you found him, this precious Ericksen of yours?' His mouth was full as he spoke, and it was hard to make out what he said.

He chuckled to himself; then leant towards the stokehold to see if coal was needed.

'Do you know him?'

'For sure!'

'What do you mean by that?'

'I mean that I can make you another one, exactly like him, right away.'

He had finished his bread and cheese, the last morsel of which had been as black as his hands. Unhurriedly he rose, picked up an empty sack, and stowed a dozen lumps of coal in it.

'That's him!' he grinned.

'What the devil -?'

'That's your Herr Ericksen large as life. The spit of the fellow that jumped overboard. I noticed on the way to Stavanger that one of our sacks was missing. When we got there it was my turn off duty, and I saw the sack dumped in the alleyway, all ready to be pushed overboard.'

'Who pushed it over?'

The man cast another glance towards the stokehold.

'Gangway, please! They're singing out for another skid of coal. y.. Anyway, that's all I can tell you.'

Lunging forward, he drove his shovel into the pyramid of coal and started swinging it with steady, powerful strokes.

The Captain watched him for some moments, started to

say something but thought better of it, then slowly, dejectedly, retraced his steps.

An icy wind was sweeping the deserted deck. High on the bridge two figures stood outlined against the darkness; he could see the Mate handing the pilot a tobacco-pouch and a box of matches.

CHAPTER V

Young Vriens

‘TELL Mr Vriens to come at once.’

‘He’s on the bridge, sir.’

‘That doesn’t matter. The pilot can carry on without him.’

Petersen hadn’t budged from his cabin since the *Polarlys* left Bergen. During the three hours she had been in port he had not had a moment to himself, what with people to see and formalities to comply with.

At the offices of the B.D.S., to which company the *Polarlys* belonged, they had pooh-poohed his anxieties.

‘It’s not your fault, Captain, so why worry? And anyhow, now that you’ve a police officer on board ...’

But the man who spoke thus was a Company Director, not a Captain. He couldn’t understand. As it so happened, it was he who had signed the letter introducing Vriens to the Captain. He added some further details:

‘I don’t know him personally, but a friend of mine who’s in charge of the Delfzijl Training Ship wrote me a six-page letter about him. He described him as a very hard-working youngster and straight as a die.’

'His father's stationed in Java; has some high post in the Weather Bureau there, I understand. The boy had to be sent home when he was ten as he couldn't stand the climate. As a result, most of his holidays were spent in boarding-houses and he's had little experience of home life, poor lad. He's only seen his people twice in the last nine years. His mother died in Java two years ago.

'After her death he worked harder than ever; he refused to take a day off even on Sundays – in fact, they had to force him to go ashore.'

The *Polarlys* was starting the second phase of her voyage north. From Hamburg to Bergen the coastline is sprinkled with fairly large towns, but thereafter, especially after Trondhjem – the next day's port of call – very few harbours lay on the way. She would merely tie up for an hour or so at landing-stages serving villages of a few dozen wooden shacks.

Already, to starboard, the banks of the fjords were white with snow. Eiders skimmed the waves and terns dived steeply, throwing up wisps of spray.

The Captain had begun by making up his log. Then, resting his elbows on his desk, he had let his fountain-pen stray over a blank sheet of paper and trace a simple figure – the graphic counterpart of the problem that was obsessing him. A big, heavily inked dot to start with; then a slender line leading off to a smaller dot; another line, another dot, and so on.

The net result was a zigzag line marked with a dot at each angle and forming an irregularly shaped geometrical figure.

The big dot stood for the murdered man. The next for Ericksen, who, whatever might be alleged, was not a purely

mythical figure – the man had certainly come on board, and was presumed to be reposing at the bottom of Stavanger dock, or else hiding somewhere on board the ship. Next came Krull, the trimmer.

A longer, fainter line led to Katia Storm, very near whom the Captain located Vriens.

Was that all? After a moment's hesitation his pen came down again, adding another dot for Schuttringer. After all, why not?

Unwittingly the Captain had given his figure the shape of a polygon – but one more line was needed to close it.

He rose to his feet, frowning, lit his pipe, and slashed his pen across the diagram. It was just then he had the idea of telling the steward to summon the Third Mate.

What aggravated him most, perhaps, was the feeling that between those six points, between the people they stood for, there existed certain secret links, not to say complicities, of which he hadn't even an inkling.

There had been so much to do at Bergen that he hadn't even managed to snatch a moment off to look in at home and see his wife and children; and this added to his rankling irritation.

There was a timid knock at the door; he went back to his chair with a gruff 'Come in!'

Vriens had come straight down from the bridge; the shoulders of his coat were sparkling with hoar-frost.

'Do you intend to wear those clothes every time you go on duty?' He tapped one of the brass buttons of the overcoat, which was gold-braided like the uniform beneath, and far too thin for the climate.

'Sorry, sir, but ...'

A lump came to his throat. How could he explain that

these were the only clothes he had? A fortnight before, he'd been a mere cadet, wearing the training-ship uniform. He'd just found time to go to Gröningen and buy the outfit for wearing which he was now being told off.

'Sit down, Mr Vriens.'

The fact that he didn't really know why he had sent for young Vriens increased the Captain's ill-humour. The sheet of paper on his desk was under his eyes, and his gaze settled on the two dots placed close together. But what he next said had no bearing on them.

'For the future, when it's your watch, I'll ask you to borrow a duffel-coat from one of the other officers or the pilot.'

'Very good, sir.' He clicked his heels, standing to attention.

'Cut it out! Do you think you're in the Navy? And didn't you hear me tell you to sit down?'

He felt a sudden desire to take the youngster by the shoulders and give him a good shaking. That way he had of standing to attention and saying, 'Very good, sir,' whenever he was given an order! But what impressed the Captain most was the extreme pallor of the boy's face, the narrowness of his shoulders, his pinched, cadaverous nostrils. In a way, they affected him even more unpleasantly than the sight of Sternberg's corpse.

'First of all I must give you back these tickets, which, I believe, are your property.'

He held out the pink cloak-room tickets from the *Kry-stall*. Unable to control his nerves, Vriens started violently.

'Needless to say,' the Captain went on, 'you've a perfect right to amuse yourself as you think fit when you're on shore. But I'd rather you didn't do it in the company of our lady passengers.'

Petersen realized he was in the wrong. Never had he said anything of the sort to any of his officers. Quite the contrary. During the summer, when there were sometimes as many as a hundred tourists on board, the officers often had flirtations, mild or otherwise, with lady passengers, and these furnished a staple topic of conversation and good-humoured chaff during the long hours on watch.

'Who told you?'

'Told me that you were at the *Krystall* with Fräulein Storm, you mean? Do you deny it?'

Vriens had risen to his feet. His cheeks were even paler than before; his lips parched and bloodless. Throbbing with passionate revolt, he was making desperate efforts to appear calm.

'Have you anything else to say, sir?' His voice was surprisingly steady.

'Did you know this lady before you came to Hamburg?'

He was barely nineteen. Petersen was twice his size and strength. Nevertheless, game as a young fighting-cock, the young man riposted :

'There are some questions which a man of honour must decline to answer.' Deliberately he looked away as he spoke.

The Captain went scarlet. He, too, sprang up from his chair, on the point of swinging the impertinent youngster's face round with a hearty smack!

'And is it honourable conduct to tell lies?' he enquired sarcastically. 'Would a man with any sense of honour swear to the police he'd seen a man jump into the sea when all he saw was a sack of coal dropped overboard?'

He almost regretted his outburst; so devastating was its effect on the wretched young man. His lips were moving, but he couldn't get a word out, he seemed to be choking for

breath. And his eyes, fixed now on Petersen, were dark with apprehension, his fingers twitching nervously.

'I ... I ...' he stammered hopelessly.

'Out with it! Did you really see Ericksen jump overboard?'

Vriens's forehead was beaded with sweat. His Adam's apple heaved convulsively.

'I ... I've nothing to say.'

He was on the point of bursting into tears. The Captain was so sure of it that he felt inclined to take him by the shoulder and shout in his ear :

'Don't be a damned young ass! Do you think it's worth getting into such a state over any woman, let alone a woman like that German girl?'

But he didn't say it – and he was to regret his silence later. He glanced at his unfinished polygon, and once again linked up in his mind the two small dots that stood for the two lovers.

'So that's what they mean on the Delfzijl Training Ship by "a youngster straight as a die"?' he muttered under his breath, but loud enough to be heard.

Vriens's voice rose almost to a scream, tears were brimming over from his eyes :

'And in Norway it is your idea of honour – to betray a woman's secret?'

He was at the end of his tether. Capable of any desperate act. His breath came in hurried gasps.

The Captain couldn't believe his ears. Then he remarked cuttingly :

'And if the woman's a common –?'

'Stop! I forbid you ...!'

And Petersen held his peace. He knew he'd gone too far.

In a flash his anger passed, and he realized how ridiculous this interview had been; worse than ridiculous – an unseemly brawl!

Why, he'd been within an ace of knocking down that miserable boy with the quivering lips and haggard eyes! A rotten business indeed. And, as usually happens on such occasions, they'd wound up by flinging their respective nationalities in each other's faces.

The silence grew oppressive. The Captain started pacing up and down the three yards' length of cabin. At last, with an effort, Vriens enquired timidly:

'Have you any other orders for me, sir?'

Petersen made no reply, but went on pacing to and fro. Suddenly he picked up the paper with the diagram on it and tore it once across.

Then, 'There's a man been killed,' he murmured.

He made the remark by way of excusing himself, while avoiding a direct apology. But Vriens took it in another way.

'Are you accusing me of ...?'

'Can you read French?'

'A bit.'

'Good. Have a look at this.'

He handed him the newspaper found under Sternberg's pillow, sat down at his desk and, while Vriens was reading, pretended to be studying his log-book.

He was feeling crestfallen. The interview hadn't panned out as he'd intended. For one thing, why had he tackled Vriens to start with, rather than another? Of course there had been that business of the cloak-room tickets and the fan he'd seen in Katia's cabin. And the fact that the young man had come on board at ten in the morning with an appalling hangover.

Also, he now recalled, the German girl had sent for Vriens on the first night out, and they'd roamed the deck together for two hours after midnight. And finally, that night at Stavanger, he had gone into her cabin.

Obviously a love affair. But what of that? Katia hadn't done anything to draw suspicion on her. The French paper made no reference to her, or any woman in particular. And the person who killed Sternberg could hardly have been a woman; considerable violence had been used, and the victim had put up a fight.

Remembering the way he had eyed her legs and how that gleam of white flesh above the stockings had made his senses tingle, he blushed for himself. Could it be that he was purely and simply jealous of his Third Mate? Smarting because the youngster, without an effort, had wiped his eye?

'No,' he told himself, 'that's not it. I've a hunch there's something shady going on.' But what? He hadn't a notion. And he felt galled, humiliated.

'Well, Vriens, what do you make of it?'

This time he dropped the 'Mister', to which he had always given an ironical intonation. The young man had read the article and was now, unthinkingly, beginning to read the next news-item.

He looked puzzled. He had ceased to hold himself erect. Anxiously he asked:

'Why did you want me to read it? What's the connexion?'

'I'll tell you. Everything seems to point to the fact that when von Sternberg boarded this ship he was tracking down the murderer of Marie Baron, and his accomplices as well perhaps. And don't forget there were women in that studio when the girl was done to death.'

Vriens seemed to make a speciality of abrupt changes of mood. An icy calm had now come over him. Quietly he enquired :

‘Is that all?’

But in his eyes the Captain seemed to see a glint of desperation.

‘What more do you want? The man who killed that poor girl – he’s on board this ship.’

‘And do you think I’m that man?’ His smile was wan, more poignant than a sob. Petersen lost patience.

‘That’s enough of it,’ he growled. ‘Go back to the bridge. I can only hope the fresh air’ll bring you to your senses.’

Inwardly he was hoping that Vriens wouldn’t take this dismissal, and he watched him from the corner of an eye. But the young man turned at once and left the cabin.

Now that he was alone, the Captain picked up the fragments of the paper on which he’d drawn his diagram and fitted them together again; then, after a final glance, tossed them into the waste-paper basket. ...

At dinner that evening Katia twice appealed to Petersen for a light, and kept on plying him with questions about the scenery and features of interest to be encountered on the voyage.

The police officer from Stavanger had himself proposed having his meals served separately, so there was always the same small group of people at the Captain’s table, served by the white-coated, shyly smiling steward.

At the head of the table sat the Captain, with Katia on his right, Evjen next to her, and Schuttringer opposite.

If the girl didn’t talk, it often happened that a whole meal went by in silence. When it was over there was nothing for it but to migrate to the smoke-room, where Katia had got

into the habit of pouring out the coffee. The steward merely placed the coffee-pot and cups on the table, then went away.

'When'll it start being very cold?'

Evjen answered her.

'There won't be any really intense cold at this time of year. We'll have twenty degrees of frost at the Lofotens, and zero, or a bit below, in the Arctic.'

Petersen was vaguely annoyed at seeing Evjen, too, succumbing to the girl's deliberate charm. It was all the more noteworthy as he quite often went through a whole voyage without saying a word to any of the other passengers. Indeed, his aloofness and taciturnity had often drawn attention to him. What sort of man was he, this tall, distinguished-looking Norwegian, with eyes grey as the sea, who never made a gesture, and spent hours without moving, on deck or in the smoke-room, gazing vaguely into space?

Is she going to turn the heads of *everyone* on board? the Captain wondered, and glanced at Schuttringer.

But the bespectacled German, who for the last two days had been coming to meals in a sweater, was bending over his plate, busy shovelling food into his large mouth with a zest that was almost revolting. An ox-tongue always figured amongst the cold dishes served at night. This was evidently his predilection; he would cut himself as many as ten slices, and butter them lavishly before devouring them.

To make things worse, the slices were so thick that the steward always cast an anxious glance at the Captain, as if to say: 'At this rate we'll never have enough tongue for the voyage!'

When Petersen was getting up, Katia addressed him.

'What's the latest about the man who jumped overboard

at Stavanger? The Bergen police must have had some news about him.'

The Captain gazed at her fixedly, so much so that it attracted Evjen's attention. Realizing this, he made haste to look away.

Katia, however, didn't flinch. She had her cigarette-holder well to the fore as usual — it was a good foot long! An extraordinary young woman. ...

The most puzzling thing about her was the combination of what seemed virginal innocence with almost overpowering sex-appeal. Seeing her, you'd think: A schoolgirl, a mere child. But a depraved child. More precisely, depraved and innocent at once. That was what impressed the Captain most — that she could seem so innocent and yet so wanton at one and the same moment, not turn by turn.

When a man stared at her she never looked away. Yet never in her eyes was there the least hint of invitation. Still, all the same ...

Even Evjen had fallen under her spell! Evjen, owner of the Kirkenes mines, a hard-bitten Northerner who seemed, by dint of living in the bleak Arctic zone, to have turned into a human iceberg where emotions were concerned. Yes, even Evjen was so much attracted at certain moments that he tried to hide from the Captain the expression in his eyes.

Whether she wore black or pink, silk or some heavier fabric, the dress revealed her outlines to perfection, and one could have sworn to noticing a warm, distinctive fragrance emanating from her body. Whenever she stooped, one caught oneself glancing into the opening of her blouse. When she walked, one couldn't help observing the graceful curves of her limbs, the supple, well-turned ankles.

Petersen at once loathed her and was captivated by her charm.

'Are you afraid of our "mystery man"?' he smiled.

'Well, he's a murderer, isn't he?'

'Would you be glad to learn that he's been drowned?'

'Glad, anyhow, to know he's not on board at present.'

With her, even fear took a voluptuous form, a delicious little shudder of her bare shoulders.

'I may as well tell you ...' He paused, glanced at Schuttringer, who seemed to resent this conversation which was keeping him from his numerous cups of coffee in the smoke-room; then at Evjen; then at Katia, whose eyes were fixed on him. 'I may as well tell you,' he resumed, 'that there's no certainty whatever that we haven't a murderer on board.'

'That's mean of you, Captain. You're trying to frighten me.'

'Perhaps.'

'But how can you say that? The man was seen to jump overboard, wasn't he?'

He felt a sudden anger with her welling up – an anger that was mainly petty, personal spite. A picture of her leading young Vriens to her cabin had risen before his eyes. And then, as his gaze fell on her neck, another picture – of his Third Mate with his head pillowed on it in the darkness at Stavanger.

'Don't be alarmed. He'll certainly be caught before he's managed to kill anyone else.'

Evjen was showing signs of impatience. Schuttringer, to pass the time, had called for another helping of stewed apricots and was munching them in his usual methodical way.

She gave another little shudder.

'I'm almost frightened of you, Captain. You're in such a nasty mood tonight.'

He rose, let the passengers go out first; then, as he always did, paused in the doorway to light his pipe. The steward came up and asked in a quavering voice :

'Please, sir, is it true, what you said just now? About the murderer?'

'Of course not. I was only pulling her leg.'

'I thought so. Otherwise ...'

'Yes?'

'I'd have asked you, sir, to let me leave the ship at Trondhjem. I couldn't stand no more of it!'

Petersen went into his cabin. As he was coming out again he ran into the Inspector on his way to his solitary dinner in the saloon. The police officer gave him a friendly, rather deferential nod.

The wind was rising, the ship beginning to roll. Waves were breaking against her port side in a steadily increasing rhythm.

The Captain wondered whether to move up to the smoke-room or to look in at Vriens's cabin – the young man had just come off watch – or else go on the bridge for a breath of fresh air. There was a dull pain in his temples, due doubtless to the worry and anxiety he had undergone during the last three days.

He had a glimpse of Inspector Jennings, who, while he ate his dinner, was perusing the magazines he had bought at Bergen.

He caught himself harking back to his diagram, stringing out mentally a list of names: Katia, Schuttringer, Krull, Evjen. Yes, he'd come to that! He'd added to his list of

suspects the worthy Evjen whom he'd known for eight years!

A bell tinkled. The steward murmured as he went by :

'I'm wanted in the smoke-room.'

When he came back he announced in a tone of stupefaction mingled with respect :

'Six bottles of champagne! The young lady's ordered them.'

'Come along, Captain!' Katia was standing at the top of the ladder. 'No, I won't let you off. I've just remembered it's my birthday to-day. I've got to celebrate it somehow; I'm dreadfully superstitious.'

Once again, looking up, he saw her legs beyond the knees. It occurred to him that she was leaning forward on purpose, deliberately on view.

'I want everybody to come,' she continued. 'Your officers as well.'

Slowly Petersen climbed the steps, still brooding over the black dots on his diagram, trying them in various positions, like the pieces of a puzzle.

In the smoke-room he found Evjen and Schuttringer seated at the same table, exchanging the usual common-places of men conversing for the first time together.

Katia was in great form, bubbling over with gaiety.

'I've always had the idea that if I didn't throw a party for my birthday the next year was bound to be a wash-out. Give me a light, Captain. No matches? From your pipe, then. Let's make a night of it – something to write home about. ... Hope it's not going to be rough, though.'

The steward entered with six bottles and champagne glasses. Petersen beckoned to him.

'Tell the two officers who're off duty to come along.'

Left to himself in the saloon, the police officer rose at

intervals to help himself to dishes that were out of reach. Like Schuttringer, he seemed to appreciate the cold tongue, but, improving on the German, smeared each slice with a coat of plum jam.

When the steward reappeared, profusely apologizing for his absence, he greeted him, his mouth full, with an amiable smile.

'That's quite all right. I've done myself proud! ... But why are they making all that noise up in the smoke-room?'

CHAPTER VI

Katia's Birthday

NOT knowing why he had been sent for, the Second Mate turned up in his working kit, a rather shabby uniform of coarse blue serge. When he entered, Katia was handing round glasses of champagne. He took the glass that was given him, then glanced at the Captain as if to enquire what it was all about. It struck him that Petersen looked as embarrassed as he himself was feeling.

He nearly made a blunder and started drinking too soon. Luckily, just then the girl turned towards the door, remarking:

'There's someone missing.'

At last Vriens arrived. Flustered at seeing everybody looking at him, he halted in the doorway.

'Come along. You've got to drink my health too, my dear.'

There was a certain constraint in the atmosphere, the birthday party looked like falling flat. Only the German

girl put up a show of rather febrile gaiety, though it was a wonder she wasn't discouraged by the lack of response on the others' part.

'Let's drink *à la Russe*,' she cried, raising her glass to her lips. 'No heel-taps, you know!'

Throwing her head back, she drained the last golden drop, then turned to Evjen.

'Be nice and open another bottle.'

To Vriens she said :

'Run down to my cabin, dear, and fetch my gramophone and records.'

The Captain had sat down; so had Schuttringer. The others remained standing, and the Second Mate looked as if he were waiting for a chance to get away.

Ill at ease, but with a show of readiness, Evjen did as he was asked : opened a couple of champagne bottles with a practised hand, and refilled the glasses.

'It's freezing in here, Captain. Aren't the radiators on?'

Petersen went to a dummy cupboard in the corner, in which the radiator was concealed, and opened it to 'Full'. A tiny jet of steam spouted from the top. From now on, a constant hiss of steam made itself heard across all other sounds.

'Captain, you've nothing to drink ! It isn't coffee, so you needn't be afraid of taking another glass, need you?'

Vriens returned with a small gramophone and two boxes of records, and placed them on a table.

'That was sweet of you. Put on a tango, please. Do you dance the tango, Captain?'

'Afraid I don't dance.'

'Never?'

'Sorry. Never!'

'What about you, Herr Evjen?'

'I'm a rotten dancer.'

'That doesn't matter. Let's have a shot anyhow. Finish your drink first. ... You can fill the glasses, darling, while we're dancing.' This last remark for Vriens, who had started the gramophone.

At last things seemed to be warming up a bit. Supplemented by the gurglings of a German tenor, the languid melody of a tango was throbbing in the smoky air.

'You dance beautifully. How silly of you to say ...!'

The rest of the remark passed unheard. Nestling against Evjen's tall, spare form, Katia looked tinier than ever. Together they struck a curious contrast: the girl all smiles and supple grace, and the man stooping awkwardly, moving stiffly with a rather bored expression.

To get to the table on which were the glasses, Vriens had to pass the Captain.

'I'm awfully sorry, sir,' he murmured, looking uneasily away.

Schuttringer was seated on a sofa beside the wall, staring straight in front of him, his eyes magnified twice life-size by the thick lenses. Katia had started giggling at some remark of Evjen's.

She seemed in the best of spirits. And yet Petersen, who was watching her closely, could have sworn her animation was put on.

'What's up? Why isn't anybody drinking?' she exclaimed as the dance ended.

With a touch of petulance she snatched from Vriens's hand a bottle that he was trying vainly to uncork, and snapped the wire round the neck with an energetic twist. The young man blushed.

'Put another record on. ... Stop! What are you up to?'

Under other circumstances Petersen couldn't have helped smiling. From the moment he'd set foot in the smoke-room Vriens had been ordered about like a small boy. He had obeyed, but with an obvious bad grace.

'Not that one. It's as old as the hills. There's a splendid Blues in the pink box.'

She walked up to the Second Mate, who didn't know which way to look, and said coaxingly :

'Let's have this one together.'

What precisely was it that brought things to a head? The climax came so gradually that it would have been hard to fix on any single incident. Katia rang for the steward and ordered another half-dozen of champagne.

'Why don't any of you drink?' she wailed. 'It's my birthday. I want everybody to have a good time.'

She was indefatigable in her attempts to get things going, but it was uphill work. She even had a dance with Schuttinger, who performed a one-step with the same patient assiduity as he brought to his daily dozen on the deck each morning. While dancing, he didn't utter a word.

At one moment her satin shoe slipped off.

'Bring it like a good boy,' she said to Vriens, who had to go on his knees to put it on her foot.

When she laughed, one had a feeling that inwardly she felt more like weeping. She was drinking more than her share; repeatedly she went up to someone with a full glass in each hand.

'*Prosit!* ... Let's drink together.'

And her cheeks grew pinker, her eyes brighter, after each libation.

After an hour of it the Second Mate whispered in the Captain's ear :

'Do you think I could slip away and turn in?'

The Captain hesitated, then shook his head. The room was becoming overheated, the air thick with cigarette-smoke. The girl's cigarette-case was empty; when Evjen held out his, she said :

'No, thanks, they're too strong. Vriens will fetch the box from my cabin. ... Won't you, dear?'

She placed the open box on the table between two champagne bottles. Rose-tipped, exotic-looking cigarettes. The gramophone was still going full blast. Evjen had made attempts to start a conversation with Schuttringer, but the German replied so briefly that he had given it up.

In fact, the only thing the young man seemed disposed to do was to drink. He gulped down glasses of champagne as gluttonously as he devoured the tongue at dinner, his whole face beaming with appreciation.

Petersen, too, was drinking pretty freely; there was no way out of it, as Katia brought him a full glass the moment he had finished one. How many had he drunk? He hadn't a notion. Ordinarily he was an abstemious man. Indeed, during the summer, when tourists invited him to cocktail parties on board, he always fell back on the Company's Regulations forbidding officers and crew to indulge in stimulants.

Now, however, he was rather glad of all these drinks. Perhaps because they heightened his awareness of the queer tension in the air, the sense of something strange and rather sinister beneath the show of gaiety.

Time and again a gramophone had been turned on in this same smoke-room while the *Polarlys* thrust her way northwards through the Atlantic swell, and up on the bridge the pilot, buffeted by the gale, swayed in his massive sea-boots. The tourists found the contrast rather exhilarating; women derived a little thrill from hearing the cadence of a jazz-tune rounded off by a seagull's plaintive mew.

But to-night there were no such contrasts. For the outside world didn't exist. No one gave a thought to it. No one went to the portholes to admire the snow-clad scarps towering above the fjords. All that mattered was taking place in the smoke-room. And yet none could have said just what was happening there.

Commonplace enough, on the face of it. A bright young thing swilling champagne, laughing over-shrilly, letting herself go; getting drunker every moment and trying to make the men around her follow suit.

Petersen was groping for the links that were missing in his pattern. Six dots on a sheet of paper joined by wavering lines. A link between these people and a dead man, Sternberg. Another leading to the naked body of a girl lying dead in a Paris studio. And a final link with the unknown assassin.

Humiliated by the part he was being forced to play, Vriens avoided meeting the Captain's gaze. Katia's voice shrilled peremptorily:

'What's come over you? Why don't you open another bottle?'

He, too, looked like bursting into tears. Evidently she noticed this, for suddenly she kissed him lightly on the corner of his mouth, murmuring a little thickly:

'Darling, how quaint you are! ... Let's have a dance

together, you and I. Yes, I insist.'

None of the men was actually drunk. But Evjen's eyes had an unwonted glitter as he watched Katia's swaying form. Schuttringer was dozing; after another drink or two he'd probably start snoring, by the look of him.

Katia was the only one who kept the flag flying, who hadn't had enough. She knew it. Every minute she would launch a droll remark, or go into fits of laughter, or try a few steps of a fancy dance.

'You're not enjoying yourselves a bit,' she sighed. 'And I do so want you to have a good time. It's not nice of you, Captain. Do please have just one dance with me.'

It was almost touching, the way she pleaded. And in her eyes he seemed to glimpse a dread of being left alone with her thoughts; of the silence that would envelop her when their revels ended.

He danced clumsily, followed by the watchful gaze of Vriens, who was standing by himself in a corner.

'Why are you so serious?'

'Sorry, but —'

'Yes, you are. And the others are just as bad. I can't bear glum faces round me. Come and have a drink. Yes, you *must*!'

She dragged him to the table which served as a buffet.

'You too, darling,' she said to Vriens. 'Come and join us. ... Oh dear, I never knew such a sticky lot of people! *Do* wake up a bit!'

This time she really overdid it. Three glasses of champagne one after the other. She passed her hand limply across her forehead.

'Give me a cigarette. No, not those. Mine are somewhere about. Why don't you fetch them, Vriens?' She stamped

her foot pettishly. 'And why doesn't someone wind up the gramophone?'

For the first time that evening she sat down. She glanced at Schuttringer, who looked lifeless as a block of stone, and shrugged her shoulders.

'Come and sit beside me, Captain. You too, darling.'

She tried to get Petersen to sit on her right and Vriens on her left. But the young man shrank away.

'What's wrong with you all?' she burst out. 'You look as if you were at a funeral. Give me a drink. No, don't try to stop me. Won't you have another, Captain? No? What a shame! I'll have to drink by myself.'

The Captain put in awkwardly :

'Do please keep calm!'

'Why should I keep calm? D'you think your ship's a Sunday School? ... Why doesn't someone start that wretched gramophone?'

A complete change had come over her. So far, though obviously highly strung, she'd always kept her nerves under control. Now they'd got the whip-hand, she was at their mercy, there were no lengths to which she might not go.

'Who'll have a drink with me? What? No one? That's too bad!'

Vriens bent forward and murmured something in her ear, evidently an appeal to 'go slow'.

'Mind your own business, darling! Why shouldn't I drink if I feel like it?'

The Captain realized that she was on the verge of hysteria. And, while dreading what might happen, he looked forward to it with a certain eagerness. For mightn't she give something away, something vital, under the influence of this crazy hot-house atmosphere which was

enabling him to visualize only too well that 'orgy' in the Paris studio? He pictured the women who had taken part in it as very much like Katia in her present state.

'Give me a light.'

She gazed at the three unopened bottles on the table. Schuttringer had woken up and lit a fat black cigar which filled the air with acrid smoke. Evjen was trying to look as unconcerned as possible.

Suddenly she jumped up, swept the bottles off on to the carpet, and ran to the door. There she halted, looked round, saw Vriens following her.

'No. Don't want you!' she panted hoarsely.

Then she raced frantically down the staircase; it was a wonder she kept her balance.

The young man hesitated for a moment; then he, too, went out.

Petersen gazed at the others. All looked acutely embarrassed. The Second Mate murmured:

'Can't I turn in now?'

Evjen started pacing up and down the room, a sombre look on his face. As the Captain walked to the door he ran into the steward, who was entering.

He took the man with him on to the promenade-deck; a flurry of snowflakes whirled round their shoulders.

'Where is she?'

'In her cabin. What's happened? When she passed me her cheeks were streaming with tears.'

'Where's Mr Vriens?'

'She slammed the door in his face. He's talking to her through it. I couldn't hear what he said. Is she drunk, sir? Oh, and I wanted to know, sir — should I put the champagne down to her account?'

'Of course. Off you go now.'

Petersen had just caught sight of a shadowy form near by. More accurately, all he'd noticed at first was the red glow of a cigarette. He walked quickly towards it. He had to bring his face close to the man's to distinguish who it was.

'What are you up to here?'

It was Krull, the trimmer. Composedly the man took the cigarette from his mouth and answered:

'You can see for yourself. I'm taking the air.'

'Is it your spell off duty?'

'No. But I gave a florin to the other fellow to carry on for me. Nothing wrong in that, eh? So long as the firemen get their coal. ...'

He made no effort to explain his presence in this part of the ship, or even try to make it seem accidental. On the contrary, his little eyes were twinkling more ironically than ever.

'Emotional little thing, isn't she?' he grinned.

The Captain said sternly:

'What! Were you watching through the porthole?'

'Sure! All the time.' He spat over the rail and, struggling with the wind, started to roll another cigarette.

'Ever met her before?' the Captain asked.

'Not her, perhaps. But hundreds like her. I had one all to myself once, so I know the species.'

'Where?' asked the Captain, determined to put the man in his place. 'In some brothel or other, I suppose, at Hamburg?'

'No, in Berlin. In the West End, to be precise - Jacobstrasse. One of those quiet streets with big modern houses standing in their own grounds.' He fumbled in his pockets for matches.

'What were you doing there?'

'Damn-all! I'd taken my law degree and was supposed to be a budding barrister, but I never showed my nose inside the law-courts. I'd a big car. One of the first valveless cars that came out, as a matter of fact.'

The humorous glint in the man's eyes, his bland imperturbability, were too much for the Captain, who enquired almost timidly :

'Who was the woman?'

'My wife. A *divorcée*. Her first husband was Breckmann, a big shot in the steel industry – you may have heard of him. She's in Egypt now, I'm told, married to a British ambassador or consul, or something of the sort.'

Glancing through the nearest porthole, the Captain saw Evjen leaving the smoke-room. Schuttringer, who still seemed half asleep, was drinking off some glasses of champagne that had been left untouched.

Captain Petersen was genuinely shocked by what Krull had told him. He was aware life had a seamy side, but, as a respectable middle-class Norwegian, he didn't like to hear about it. He tried to reassure himself with the reflection that as likely as not the man was lying.

But he continued observing Krull from the corner of an eye, remembering his first impression of the man and convinced that, whatever his social antecedents, he hadn't always been a 'dock-rat'.

'Why did you come up to the promenade-deck?' he asked.

'To see.'

'To see what?'

'Them!'

The ship was passing a snow-clad peak near which a red

light marked a hidden reef. They had a brief glimpse of a little wooden bungalow all by itself at the foot of the mountain. People lived there, miles and miles from the nearest village. And there wasn't even a road. Only a strip of meadow-land under the overhanging cliffs, just big enough to rear a dozen sheep or goats.

In the smoke-room Schuttringer rose heavily to his feet, stretched himself and yawned; then, noticing an inch of champagne remaining in Petersen's glass, drank it up.

'It's nothing much to look at. ...'

The Captain swung round, taken aback not merely by the strangeness of the remark but by something in Krull's voice – an undertone of almost sentimental regret.

'What do you mean?'

'It's champagne. Quite an ordinary brand, of course, but that's what it is. And champagne ... No, what's the good, you wouldn't understand. Well, well. I've got to get back or my mate'll be wanting another florin. Just a word of advice, Captain. Leave *all that* alone.'

He strode rapidly away. Petersen thought of calling him back, but judged it beneath his dignity. He waited till the man was out of sight before making a move. Passing the smoke-room, he saw that it was empty.

Empty, too, the passage, except for the steward, who remained on duty until midnight and had settled down on a chair at the far end.

'Where's Mr Vriens?'

'When he found she wouldn't let him in he went away.'

'The others?'

'In their cabins. Mr Evjen made me bring a bottle of soda-water.'

Petersen lingered for a moment. It struck him then that,

though not at all drunk, he wasn't quite steady on his legs.

'Ever seen the trimmer down here?'

'Who do you mean, sir?'

'It's no matter. Good night. Bring me my coffee at half-past five as usual.'

He fancied he heard sounds in Katia's cabin. But he didn't dare to go and listen at the door with the steward looking on.

As he undressed he caught himself murmuring: 'What the devil did he mean by that?' For Krull's remark, 'A word of advice, Captain. Leave *all that* alone,' kept running in his head.

That night he dreamt that Katia, who was now married to a British consul, had persuaded him to dance with her in the first-class saloon of a three-funnelled liner. She had a curious way of intertwining her limbs with her partner's, and at one moment, to the amusement of all present, and his own embarrassment, she stopped and kissed him full on the mouth. Meanwhile a waiter, the spit of Peter Krull, started marching round the room, bawling like a cheapjack:

'Who wants a bottle of the best? Don't all speak at once! It's ... champagne!'

CHAPTER VII

The Missing Bank-notes

THE following day, Wednesday, which began by a two-hours' halt at Trondhjem, passed so tranquilly as to seem like a false lull. Since leaving Hamburg, Petersen had gone short of sleep, and this, coupled with the effects of the

champagne, made him feel thoroughly limp, mentally as well as physically.

When the steward came on to the bridge and told him Katia was unwell and staying in her cabin, he merely shrugged his shoulders and puffed his pipe a little more quickly.

He didn't set eyes on Vriens all the morning. In any case, nobody ventured on the deck, which was being swept by a blizzard of fine dry snow that seemed to penetrate one's pores and form a crust of ice upon one's cheeks.

The *Polarlys* was nearing the Arctic Circle. Fewer and fewer houses dotted the mountain-side. Three times in the course of the day they put in at hamlets of a dozen houses and unloaded crates and barrels, which the villagers took away on sledges.

The snow was eighteen inches deep at the last hamlet, and children could be seen going about on skis.

Sky and sea were a dull grey. The *Polarlys* was hugging the coast, and such light as there was seemed issuing from the livid whiteness of the mountains towering above her.

Only the Captain, Evjen, and Schuttringer appeared at lunch. Evjen made two or three perfunctory remarks; then the conversation petered out.

After lunch Petersen looked up the police officer, who tactfully kept out of the way as much as possible.

'If things go on like this,' said Jennings complacently, 'we'll have no trouble and it'll be quite a pleasant voyage. Personally I'm convinced the murderer lies some fathoms deep in Stavanger harbour.'

The Captain didn't attempt to undeceive him.

'What's she doing?' he asked the steward, who was coming out of Katia's cabin with a tray.

'She's lying on her bunk with her face to the wall. She hardly touched her lunch, and didn't answer when I asked her how she was.'

After an hour's nap, towards three, Petersen went on the bridge, where it was Vriens's watch. The young man saluted the Captain, who merely waved his hand and turned at once to the pilot, with whom he'd made over a hundred voyages.

'Think we'd better batten down?'

So far they had been sheltered by the almost continuous line of rocks and islands fringing the north-west coast of Norway. It would start again in the neighbourhood of the Lofotens. Meanwhile, however, a stretch of open sea lay ahead, and it looked like a stiff blow before nightfall.

The fur-clad figure, solidly planted on huge wooden-soled sea-boots, swung slowly round.

'Aye, Captain. It might be safer.'

As was customary, Vriens was standing in the corner of the bridge while the pilot, in the centre by the helmsman, conned the ship, often with merely a wave of his thickly gloved hand.

Not for the first time, the Captain was struck by the contrast in the build of the two men, the one so frail, the other so burly. Vriens, who looked ill at ease, avoided meeting the Captain's eye. Petersen wondered whether he should speak to him or not.

To his surprise, the young man made the first move, saying as he took a quick step forward :

'I'd like to tell you, sir ...' He paused.

Petersen waited, watching him over his shoulder.

'... that, of course, once we're back in Hamburg, I'll ask you to let me sign off.'

All he got by way of answer was a grunt. The Captain went down the ladder and back to his cabin — after glancing into the smoke-room, where he saw Evjen at a table littered with business documents.

The afternoon passed drearily. Dinner was much like lunch except that, now the ship was coming into open water, plates and glasses had a tendency to slither across the table. Evjen stuck it out, though his smile looked rather forced.

Schuttringer, however, who for some moments had been clenching his jaws, rose abruptly after a particularly steep roll and stumbled away towards his cabin.

'Is she really ill?' Evjen enquired.

Petersen made a non-committal gesture.

'A strange little person, isn't she? Last night I really thought we were in for trouble. ...'

The Captain, who was listening to the sound of the waves pounding his ship, heard a big sea crash down on the fo'c'sle. Putting down his napkin, he went up on the bridge, picking up his sheepskin coat on the way.

He saw two figures leaning on the rail. The lights of a small port where they were due to call were twinkling across a veil of tiny snowflakes. He could see Vriens's haggard face outlined against the snow, and noticed that the young man's jaws were clenched as Schuttringer's had been.

'Feeling sick?' he asked gruffly.

'No,' the youngster almost shouted, stiffening up indignantly. He was shivering with cold.

'Put this on.'

The Captain tossed his sheepskin coat towards him and, after exchanging a few words with the pilot, went down to

his cabin and turned in. He hadn't seen Krull once, during the day.

As for Katia, he pictured her lying huddled up on her bunk. For her, too, he supposed, the motion of the ship had been too much; but she had obstinately refused to send for the steward or stewardess.

For Petersen the best part of the next day, Thursday, was the early morning, when it was his watch and he was keeping the pilot company on the bridge.

Bodö had been left behind and the *Polarlys* was threading her way between the Lofotens in the teeth of a blizzard. Their faces were lashed by volleys of brittle ice-dust that forced their way through the seams of clothes and boots, and for minutes on end it was impossible to see anything, or even keep one's eyes open.

The two men stumped up and down the bridge, sometimes pausing to hand each other a tobacco-pouch or lighter. The thermometer stood at fifteen degrees below freezing-point. Now and again in a brief lull there came a burst of wintry sunshine, enabling them to see two or three squalls blanketing the sea at different points of the horizon, and mountains looming close at hand, sheeted in flawless white, without a house, a tuft of grass, or any vestige of life.

There was an elemental spaciousness about it all; every spur of certain peaks, over thirty miles distant, stood out in sharp relief.

All of a sudden a thirty-foot fishing-smack shot past the steamer, only a few yards off, her deck buried in snow, her shrouds festooned with ice. The two fishermen leaning on the taffrail were so smothered up in clothing that they looked like bales of piece-goods.

The keen air nipped the lungs. But Petersen took eager

draughts of it. It acted on him like a tonic and helped him to dispel the hateful visions that had been haunting him for days: of the dead girl in the Paris studio, of Sternberg scrabbling at his chest with blood-stained fingers as he died.

He could even gaze with indifference at the detective from Stavanger, who, not knowing what to do with himself, was contemplating the snowscape from a doorway on the promenade-deck, to leeward.

There was a cough behind him. He gave a slight start, then frowned, seeing Schuttringer standing on the bridge.

'What do you want?'

There was a notice at the foot of the ladder forbidding passengers to use it.

'I'd like to have a word with you, Captain, in private.'

The longest remark he'd made so far to anyone on board. His tone was extremely formal, if a little ill-assured. He had taken off his cap; in the bleak light his bare, pink head looked almost indecent.

'Put on your cap. Well, what is it?'

The German pointed to the pilot.

'That's all right,' the Captain said. 'You can speak in his presence.'

'I've been robbed.'

'What!'

'Someone got into my cabin last night or this morning and stole two thousand marks and a few hundred crowns from my suitcase. I'm extremely sorry to add to your troubles. But I absolutely must get back the money; it's all I had with me for my travelling expenses.'

The pilot, who had turned, was staring at the passenger with interest. Petersen's face hardened.

'Are you quite sure the money's gone?'

'Quite sure. For safety's sake I didn't keep it in my wallet but in a plain blue envelope which I slipped between my shirts.'

'What were your movements this morning?'

'I had a bath at eight. Then I went to the dining-saloon for breakfast, and after that strolled on the after-deck. So I was out of my cabin all that time. It's only just now that ...'

The Captain turned to the pilot.

'It'll be all right if I leave you for a bit, eh?'

He went down the ladder first. As he was passing the saloon he ran into the steward.

'Did you see anyone going into No. 22?'

The steward jumped like a startled rabbit.

'What! No. 22 as well! Mr. Evjen's just been asking me if anybody went into his cabin.'

Evjen, whose door stood open, had heard the conversation. He put his head out of the door.

'Captain!' he called. 'Will you step in for a moment?'

Though badly shaken, he had himself well in hand. Only the tremor of his long, well-manicured fingers betrayed his agitation.

'Have you had something stolen?' Schuttringer asked.

But Evjen merely eyed him suspiciously and beckoned the Captain into his cabin, closing the door behind him.

'You know, Captain, I only travel south once a year. There's no bank at Kirkenes and I always bring back with me enough ready money to keep the business going for six months or so. In that leather dispatch-case I had yesterday evening fifty thousand crowns, as well as some gold coins. I always bring some for my wife.'

'And the money's gone?'

'The dispatch-case is empty. I've only just discovered it.'

'I was working in the smoke-room, and I needed a business letter that I'd put in the dispatch-case, which was stowed away under some clothing in my cabin-trunk. The lock of the trunk has been forced.'

Meanwhile Schuttringer was stalking noisily up and down the passage.

The Captain said to Evjen: 'Would you mind not telling anyone about your loss for the present?'

'What do you propose to do? Do you think ...?'

Petersen went out without waiting for him to finish, and gave the same injunction to the German, who repeated:

'Look here, I absolutely *must* get back that money. It's all I have.'

The Captain found Jennings on deck at the same place where he'd seen him from the bridge. The police officer greeted him with a beaming smile.

'Good morning, Captain. Isn't the scenery magnificent! Really, southerners have no idea how ...'

'Come with me.'

He led him to his cabin, and slammed the door.

'Two thefts have taken place on board: one in cabin 14, adjoining this one, from which fifty thousand crowns have been stolen; the other in No. 22, from which two thousand marks have disappeared.'

'You can't mean it!' The Inspector looked completely flabbergasted. 'Here, on board the ship!'

'It was done last night or early this morning. There are steps I'd like you to take right away. First, to search thoroughly Fräulein Storm's cabin.'

'Do you really think —?'

'If necessary, you can have her person searched by the stewardess. Next, I want you to inspect my Third Mate's

cabin. And, lastly, if nothing's been discovered, I'd like you to have a look through the belongings of one of the bunker-hands, a man named Krull.'

'Yes, I'd be more inclined to suspect ...'

'Still, I'll ask you, if you've no objection, to begin with the German girl. She's in her cabin now.'

'What shall I tell her?'

'That something's been stolen and it's your duty to search the whole ship.'

'Will you come with me?'

Petersen hesitated, then abruptly made up his mind.

'All right, I'll go with you.'

They met Evjen coming up the companion-way.

'Would you go into the smoke-room and wait there, with Herr Schuttringer, till I come to you.'

To the steward he said :

'See that nobody enters the corridor until further orders.'

He looked quite calm. Inwardly he was seething with excitement. It was he who knocked at Katia's door. Some seconds passed before there was an answer.

'Who's there?'

'The Captain. It's urgent.'

'I don't intend to get up today.'

'I'm sorry to disturb you, but I must insist on entering.'

As on most ships, the cabin doors on the *Polarlys* did not lock from inside. Turning the knob, he beckoned to the Inspector.

The reek of cigarettes and scent caught his throat, and the smoke was so dense that at first he couldn't see the girl, who was lying huddled up on the bunk.

She was in pyjamas; the coat was sagging at the neck, her skin was moist with perspiration. Her cheeks were drawn

and bloodless. As they entered she shrank away and tried to wrap the counterpane round her.

'A large sum of money has been stolen on board and ...

'And you suspect me of having stolen it?'

'I suspect no one. But it's the Inspector's duty to search the whole ship.'

With a shrill, angry laugh she jumped off the bed, no longer troubling about appearances.

'All right! Search away! But I didn't know it was the habit in Norway ...'

The second time this question of nationality had cropped up! The Captain remembered Vriens saying much the same thing to him, with the same taunting intonation.

'I suppose I'm not allowed to go out? It is my bed you want to search?'

Angrily she whipped off sheets and blankets; a German novel she had been reading tumbled on to the floor.

Petersen was struck by the difference between her behaviour now and his first impression of her. Hitherto – with the exception of the night when she had drunk too much – she'd always seemed quite sure of herself, never betrayed alarm or given the least loophole for suspicion.

But now there was no mistaking it; this display of temper was intended to mask something uncommonly like panic. For it was overdone. She snatched a handbag off the rack and tossed its contents over the carpet. She flounced about the cabin, laughing shrilly, hurling taunts at the intruders.

'My undies. I'm sure you're interested in them ... gentlemen!'

The fact that she wasn't dressed, that her face was greasy and for the first time they were seeing her untouched by

rouge or powder, heightened the impression of a complete breakdown.

'What else do you want to see? Why, of course, I might have the money hidden under my pyjamas. Like me to take them off?'

She started unbuttoning the jacket.

'Now are you satisfied, Captain? ... But perhaps all you wanted was to have a peep at a girl in bed. Wait! You've forgotten to look in my hat-box.'

Blushing furiously, the Inspector made helpless, deprecatory gestures.

Petersen, however, who was standing at the door, had kept his presence of mind. And he recalled the trimmer's warning, to 'leave *all that* alone.'

Was he beginning to catch the drift of that remark? Wasn't this German girl more alien, more incomprehensible to him than any of those Lapp women he had seen in the Far North, carrying their children on their backs across the snowfields?

His wife was a clergyman's eldest daughter. He had courted her for a year, and as they walked and talked in the garden beside the church – a small wooden building painted green – the young lovers had always had the other children, the youngest of whom was six, in close attendance.

She played the organ, he the violin, and musical evenings at home ranked high amongst their simple pleasures. In the course of his voyages the Captain had come up against the brutal side of life, in dockland and the squalid haunts of seamen; but such scenes had left no impression, he hadn't even tried to grasp their significance.

His Second Mate was engaged to be married. His Chief Engineer had a family of eight. ...

Still, he was no plaster saint. On certain rare occasions during the summer, when the ship was crowded with passengers and flirtations were the order of the day, he had spent a night in a cabin other than his own. But he had never let his mind dwell on these brief lapses, and a few days later might easily have failed to recognize the woman who had attracted him. And to salve his conscience he brought back from Tromsø a specially large assortment of the quaint toys made by the Laplanders, for the delectation of his children.

From these adventures he had learnt that there exists in the world a breed of women highly strung and temperamental to an almost frightening degree, who have no use for home life and its blameless domesticities. Occasionally he had been so disgusted by the amorous enormities of such women that his one idea had been to escape from their embraces, to get back to the bridge and feel the clean, cold sea-wind on his cheeks.

Katia seemed to be a woman of that type. He kept his eyes fixed on her, convinced that he would get to understand her in the end.

He was offended by the smell of the cabin no less than by the open pyjama jacket disclosing the young, ripening breasts. Other details caught his eye: a bottle of Green Chartreuse, the exotic cigarettes, certain articles of lingerie of whose mere existence his wife had never dreamed.

For a moment he tried to picture Vriens in this cabin on the night the two of them had shared it.

'Nothing here,' the police officer announced uncomfortably.

'You don't mean to say you've finished! Hadn't you better rip open the mattress just to make sure?'

She got the words out with an effort, as if she were on the verge of tears. But she stood her ground, her hands on her hips and holding her head high, till the two men left the cabin.

It was only as he heard the door slammed behind him that it struck Petersen he'd forgotten to apologize.

'Friends next,' he said.

The police officer hadn't yet got over the visit to Katia's cabin; his cheeks were still burning with shame. Yet he, too, had been vaguely thrilled by an experience so far outside the range of all he knew. It had given him a glimpse of another world, a world of passions and sensations of which until now he'd never had an inkling.

'Did you really think she had the money?' he asked innocently.

A sailor was polishing the brass fittings of the officers' quarters.

'Is the Third Mate in his cabin?'

'No, sir, I don't think so.'

Petersen opened the door. The first thing he set eyes on was a big group photograph of the Delfzijl Training Ship pinned above the bunk. The cadets were lined up on the deck and poop, wearing full uniform and white gloves; some, the youngest, were proudly perched on the yard-arms.

On the table lay the Norwegian *Manual of Seamanship* open at the chapter on signals.

'Must I search here too?' sighed the Inspector.

'Yes, please.' But the Captain's slight shrug showed how little he, too, relished the task.

The suitcase contained the young man's training-ship kit, still bearing his number marked in red cotton. There was another group photograph, taken on the night of the

Cadets' Ball; paper streamers, favours, plump, healthy-looking Dutch girls sandwiched between young men in uniform.

Vriens was standing by himself in a corner, wearing a paper cap; one had the impression that he was rather ashamed of his unnautical headgear. The magnesium flash had made him blink.

At the bottom of the suitcase were some dictionaries, and from beneath them Jennings unearthed a lady's handkerchief which had the scent Katia used. Then, below a notebook, a wad of bank-notes.

Petersen and the police officer noticed it at the same moment. They stared at each other.

'Count the notes.' The Captain's voice had lost its usual ring.

For two minutes the only sound in the cabin was the rustle of the crisp, almost square thousand-crown notes.

'Forty.'

'Sure?'

'I've counted them twice.'

Footsteps sounded outside. Vriens halted in the doorway with much the same embarrassed expression as he wore on the photograph they had just been examining. He looked at the Captain, then at Jennings; finally his eyes fell on the bank-notes.

The abruptness of the change that came over him took both men by surprise. In a couple of seconds his face, already showing signs of weariness, became grey and wrinkled like an old man's, and his shoulders sagged as if a load had fallen on them.

He said nothing. His arms hanging limply, his eyes fixed on the money, he waited, dazed with horror.

CHAPTER VIII

Katia's Plight

BEFORE a single question had been put, Vriens sank on to the edge of the bunk, on which lay the open suitcase.

'Please tell us where this money comes from.' Unconsciously the Captain had spoken in a tone that was almost fatherly.

The young man's shoulders heaved; he stared at the linoleum carpet with unseeing eyes.

'I didn't steal it.'

'You mean that somebody asked you to hide this money in your cabin?'

'I didn't even know it was here. I'm sure it wasn't at seven this morning.' But he sounded hopeless, as if it weren't worth while trying to convince them. And, after that, all they could get out of him was :

'I didn't steal the money. I know nothing about it.'

No sooner had Jennings and the Captain left the cabin than they heard an outburst of sobbing behind the door, so tragic in its violence that the detective was alarmed and halted, gazing anxiously at Petersen.

'Do you think ...?' he began.

'I don't think anything,' the Captain interrupted rudely, much to Jennings' surprise.

'There's still ten thousand crowns missing.'

'And Schuttringer's two thousand marks as well.'

The Captain walked briskly away. The gong was booming down the corridors and Evjen had just taken his seat in the saloon. Schuttringer, who was entering, was the first to

notice the wad of notes in Petersen's hand. He hurried forward.

'My money. Good.'

'Afraid it isn't. So far we've only recovered forty thousand crowns belonging to Mr Eñjen.'

'Forty!' Evjen exclaimed, and began counting the notes.

'But I hope,' the Captain said, 'that Jennings will manage to find the rest.'

'Who on earth ...?'

'No questions for the present, if you don't mind.'

'Excuse me.' There was an obstinate look on Schutteringer's face. 'The man who robbed this gentleman is certainly the man who took my money. So I'm entitled to know ...'

'Bring us our lunch, steward. Hasn't Fräulein Storm left her cabin?'

'I haven't seen her about, sir.'

'And she hasn't rung?'

'No, sir.'

Evjen, who had placed the bank-notes on the table in front of him, said to the Captain :

'Would you mind keeping this money in your strong-box till the end of the voyage?'

'Wish I'd done that when I came on board,' the German grunted. 'It's a nice look-out for me, landing at Kirkenes and ...'

Petersen didn't wait to hear the rest, and walked away to his cabin. As he was locking his strong-box two blasts of the siren sounded overhead. He picked up his sheepskin coat and went on deck, telling the steward to keep lunch for him later.

They had reached Svolvær, a port where three or four thousand fishing-boats from all parts of Norway congregate every February for the codfishing season.

A forest of masts; a pungent tang of resin in the air.

Normally the population is under two thousand, but on these occasions the little town is packed with men in fur coats or oilskins, sledges careering down the streets. Everywhere crumbling mounds of codfish, ready salted, are being shovelled up into barrels.

A small black steamer in mid-harbour was surrounded by a busy swarm of fishing-boats. The fish that those on board were buying would go direct to Aalesund, without being put on shore.

There was no escape for Petersen; he had to shake hands with all and sundry, listen to local gossip and fish-dealers' estimates of the catch, while the detective kept watch, as discreetly as possible, as the end of the gangway.

Three fishing-boats had been lost sight of on the previous day, carried away towards the Maelstrom, and were feared lost. By way of consolation, the catch had been first-rate: forty-five million cod.

Petersen hardly heard what they were saying. His eyes were lingering on a familiar scene, familiar faces. Wooden houses, mostly painted in bright colours; steep streets, all deep in snow; children dashing about on skis, dodging in and out amongst sledges, packing-cases, barrels.

Some steamers of fifty to two hundred tons were alongside the same quay as the *Polarlys*. Each had affixed to it a list written on a slate giving the names of the islands where it was to call. From all directions people were hailing Petersen, who tried to conjure up an answering smile.

He could see into the saloon where Evjen and the

German were still seated facing each other. A Laplander was standing by himself at the far end of the quay; he seemed fascinated by the noise and bustle of the harbour. He wore a gaudy, parti-coloured costume, a big four-cornered cap. In the distance, beyond the fjord, the snow-clad mountains whence he had come fretted the horizon.

A colourful, carefree scene. Yet with an underlying note of Nordic gravity which, as a rule, enchanted Captain Petersen.

While he was trying to think himself into harmony with his surroundings, a new idea occurred to him. He had been picturing Katia standing in the untidy cabin reeking of scent and cigarette-smoke, her skin still moist from the warmth of the bed.

A fishing-boat was gliding slowly past, quite close to the *Polarlys*. On the deck two men, knee-deep in codfish, were deftly cutting open the heads, pulling out the tongues and dropping them into a bucket. This done, they slit the fish lengthwise into two equal fillets, and tossed the guts and backbones overboard.

Petersen watched them with unseeing eyes. They were no more than a painted backcloth to his vision of Katia, every detail of whose form stood out in bright relief. He was thinking:

'There wasn't any money in her cabin.'

He recalled Jennings's movements, the little heap of lingerie — especially the black silk chemises which had so astonished him.

No, there had been no money anywhere, not a trace of it. Nor, when he delved into his memories of the first search at fog-bound Stavanger, could he remember having seen a single bank-note.

The Inspector was at his post beside the gangway, up which a steady stream of dockers was coming on-board.

A little beyond him stood Krull, still unshaven, his chin covered with reddish stubble. The Captain had a notion that Krull was watching him, and looked away.

'Ring the first bell,' he said to the Second Mate. They were due to sail in ten minutes.

'I say, Skipper, is it true what I've heard? About Vriens?'

'I know nothing about it.'

'Will he keep his watch?'

'If he doesn't, you'll replace him.'

Like puffs of golden dust drifting across the mist, the sunlight came and went. For a while a group of sails, a dripping prow, or a tiled belfry would gleam with broken lights, then merge again into the grey monotony of land and sea.

After some hesitation the Lapp came on board and took a third-class passage to Hammerfest. But he refused to go to the cabins, and sat down on the capstan — where Petersen was to discover him still seated three hours later.

'Ring the second bell.'

The tackle was hauled in, the hatches put back over the holds, which were beginning to empty.

Though a strong smell of fish pervaded the little port, the Captain still felt clinging to his nostrils the curious, bitter-sweet aroma of Katia's cabin.

'Is Mr Vriens on the bridge?'

Yes, there he was at his post, a tensely rigid, hardly human figure, like a gaunt African fetish, outlined against the greyness. One had the impression that everything was swimming before his eyes, all sounds merging in a muffled roar.

Nevertheless, at a signal from the pilot he went up to the funnel and gave three tugs at the siren lanyard.

The water boiled under the sternpost. Boats scurried away in all directions like a swarm of panicked ants. A flight of seagulls began circling round the ship.

The fair-haired, white-coated steward approached the Captain with his usual timid smile.

'Coming down to lunch, sir?'

'Not yet.'

Petersen couldn't bring himself to take his eyes off the scene in the harbour. They were passing a factory which ten years before worked for the whaling industry but now produced only cod-liver oil.

Suddenly, as the ship turned, a panorama of amazing beauty opened out before him: snow-mountains sparkling in a burst of sunlight, a shimmering expanse of green, translucent waves.

A fleeting glamour; for a moment later the light faded and the mist drew a grey curtain over sea and land. Three minutes afterwards the mountains showed like spectral icebergs, infinitely remote.

Petersen walked past the police officer without a word. When, after lunch, Evjen attempted to waylay him in the passage, he went straight to his cabin, on the pretext of urgent work.

As soon as the coast was clear he came out, paused before Katia's door, clicked his fingers impatiently, and entered without knocking.

Nothing had changed since the morning. The air still reeked of scent. A blanket, with a small brown ring burnt by a cigarette-end, trailed on the floor.

Silent and motionless, the German girl was sitting up on

the bed with her back to the bulkhead. She was still in pyjamas, bare-footed, her hair straggling down her cheeks. The mascara round her eyes had run, giving them a strange, almost sinister expression.

The Captain shut the door and stepped over a dressing-case lying on the carpet.

'I've come to ask you just one question,' he said.

She gazed at him apathetically. The fighting mood had passed; she had lost all power to react, had ceased even to trouble about her appearance. Her mouth drooped at the corners.

He meant to speak as gently as he could. Indeed, he would have liked to convey to her that this second visit, without the Police Inspector, had no hostile intent.

Now he was in the cabin there was an odd reversal of his experience on deck. It was now an after-image of the colourful scene in the harbour that hovered before his eyes, and Katia seemed relatively unreal, out of focus.

'Would you mind telling me how much money you had with you when you left Hamburg?'

She smiled wryly. There was in her smile a hint of mockery, directed not at the Captain but at herself – or at the irony of fate.

'I assume,' he hastened to add, 'you have still this money with you? You can't have spent it on board, as the bills are settled only at the end of the voyage.'

'Well, my bill won't be settled.'

Without moving from her place, she reached up to a crocodile-skinned handbag in the rack just over her head. An elegant bag, hailing from a well-known shop in Bond Street.

She gave the handle a tug and the bag fell on the bed.

'There you are! See how much there is. Wait, hand me my cigarettes first, please.'

As he seemed reluctant to handle the bag, she opened it and pushed it towards him. Then she lit her cigarette with an exquisitely made gold lighter.

'All the money I have is in it. ... What? Too shy?'

She blinked, as the smoke was getting in her eyes. Then she pulled out a handkerchief – exactly like the one that had been found in Vriens's cabin – from the bag; after it a vanity-case containing powder, rouge, and mascara for the eyes. Finally she scattered on the bed a handful of paper money.

'Count it. Ten marks. Fifty Belgian francs. Three French ten-franc notes. Oh, and here's a two-and-a-half florin piece.'

She let the bag drop on the carpet; then, leaning back against the bulkhead, added:

'And that's the lot!'

Her voice was almost calm, the shrillness had gone out of it. And her expression was much more human than before, much more like that of the women Petersen was used to.

One day a girl of sixteen who lived next door had been romping with him on the mountain-side and, tripping over a pine-stump, sprained her ankle. She was inclined to be coquettish and had been teasing him a moment before.

She had steeled herself not to cry, had even conjured up a smile. But he could see that she was in pain; her face was working, her lips were quivering, and red blotches had appeared on her cheeks.

In many ways just now Katia reminded him of that Norwegian girl. And she seemed aware that he was looking at her with different eyes, for with an almost demure, quite

unexpected gesture she drew her pyjama jacket closer round her throat.

'So that's that! I can't even pay for the champagne I invited you to drink with me. I'd about enough to pay for my passage. Six hundred marks I think it was. And I spent what I had left that last night, at Hamburg.'

'With Vriens, at the *Krystall*?'

He would have felt more at ease sitting down. But the only place to sit on was the bunk, and that would have been too near her. The floor was so littered with things that he had to stand with his feet wide apart.

'What did you propose to do at Kirkenes?'

She didn't reply, but shrugged her shoulders, giving him an almost pitying look.

'Don't bother about me! What's the use anyhow? ... Would you hand me my bag, please?'

She took a little mirror from it and gazed ironically at her reflected self. Her fingers closed on the lipstick, then let it fall.

'Have you any relations?'

'That hardly matters, does it? When we get to Kirkenes the only thing you can do is to hand me over to the police, as I can't pay for the wine I drank at meals or the champagne. And the steward won't have a tip.'

Had she broken into lamentations or made a scene it would have produced on Petersen a less poignant impression of utter, inconsolable despair. He couldn't think of anything to say. At last he asked:

'Have you had lunch?'

'No.'

Her toe-nails, which were almost brushing his trouser-legs, were as pink and highly polished as her finger-nails.

'Do you know,' the Captain said, 'some of the stolen money has been found in the Third Mate's cabin?'

'Vriens's cabin?'

She gave a start and flung her cigarette down without even troubling to see where it dropped. Her apathy had left her.

'What's that?' she cried. 'It can't be true. Surely you don't mean —?'

'Forty thousand-crown notes were found in his trunk.'

'I tell you, it's ridiculous. You know that as well as I do.' She had straightened up and, as there was no standing room in the narrow cabin, was kneeling on the bunk. 'Listen, Captain,' she continued earnestly. 'I swear to you that ...'

She faltered, went limp again, her arms drooped listlessly. Her head was bowed, and the Captain noticed that the skin at the roots of her hair was pink — an after-effect of fever.

'Please go away,' she said helplessly. 'It's no good my talking, you won't believe me. But all that *must* be cleared up somehow or other.'

'Ever been to the Rue Delambre at Paris?'

She didn't flinch as he'd expected. She merely shrugged her shoulders, repeating: 'Please go away now.'

Suddenly she asked:

'Where's Vriens?'

'On duty, on the bridge.'

'Leave me, please. I've something to do.' To rise to her feet she had to step on the dressing-case lying on the floor. She snatched a dress from a hook. 'Won't you go away?'

Obviously she had come to a decision. She flung off her pyjama jacket and slipped the dress over her bare skin.

Petersen beat a hasty retreat, too embarrassed to say anything by way of leave-taking. He found the steward waiting in the saloon.

'Will you have lunch, sir?' the man repeated.

But instead of sitting down he went up to the smoke-room. Evjen was pacing up and down, while Schuttringer was engrossed in the opening moves of a game of chess. This did not prevent him from looking up and asking:

'Any news of my two thousand marks?'

'Not yet.'

'What I can't make out,' said Evjen, who had been thinking the matter over, 'is why the other ten thousand crowns and the gold coins are missing. Why should the thief have divided the money into two equal parts like that? It doesn't make sense.'

'He didn't want to put all his eggs in one basket — that's why,' grunted Schuttringer; after studying the board, his chin cupped in his hand, he moved a black pawn forward. 'Thanks to which precaution he still has money left.'

Petersen saw a shadowy form glide past the porthole; though he had only a momentary glimpse of a man's shoulders, he felt sure it was Krull.

'What does the Inspector think?' Evjen enquired. 'Between ourselves, Captain, do you think he knows his job? Personally I find him rather — how shall I put it?'

'Like all police inspectors,' the German cut in. He was poring over the chessboard. Then, sticking out his tongue in the effort of his concentration, he moved a bishop four squares diagonally and muttered, 'Check!'

Darkness was falling. Only the mountains glistened still with a light that seemed artificial, as if the snow was

lit up from within. The sea beside the ship was black as ink, toning off imperceptibly to a neutral grey where it merged with the horizon.

As the Captain was about to climb the ladder leading to the bridge he saw the trimmer coming down it, the stump of a dead cigarette dangling from his under-lip. He looked put out when he saw the Captain, who asked :

'What were you doing up there?'

'It's my spell off.'

'Can't you read?'

Petersen pointed to the notice forbidding access to the bridge.

'It's the first ship in which ...' the man muttered.

'Whom were you talking to up there?'

'To nobody. They're both as close as clams!'

The Captain had a disagreeable feeling that the man was trying to read his thoughts. It was all the more irritating as he himself hardly knew what they were.

'Clear out!' he said gruffly, stepping on to the ladder.

The pilot, who was standing with his back to the compass, greeted him with a wave of his hand towards the sunset.

'Looks like a cold snap, don't it? If it lasts they'll have to break the ice in Kirkenes Bay, like in the middle of the winter.'

The bridge lay open to the wind, but at each corner was a shelter in which the officer on watch could take cover. Vriens, however, though he had only a thin serge overcoat on, was standing in the full blast of the wind. He looked positively frozen. His lips were blue, his bare hands, clenched on the rail, were bloodless.

'What did I tell you?' Petersen exclaimed angrily.

The young man gazed at him blankly, searching his memory.

'I told you to borrow a thick coat from one of the other officers when you go on watch. And gloves.'

'Very good, sir.' But he didn't move.

'How many revolutions are you doing?'

'A hundred and ten, sir.'

'How much water have we got here?'

'Eighty fathoms, sir.'

What he needs is a good hiding, the Captain thought – or to be cut his jam ration like a naughty child! For in his brand-new uniform, with the gold braid still undulled by wind and weather, he looked more like a youngster in a sailor suit than a ship's officer. His puny chest was heaving, there were dark rings round his eyes, and his jaws were clenched in a desperate effort to show that he could 'stick it'.

CHAPTER IX

Sternberg's Nephew

Dusk had set in earlier than usual. Though it was only three, the lights had had to be switched on. The Captain gave the order to put the covers on the hatches. 'Just to be on the safe side.'

Watching Vriens from the corner of an eye, he lingered on the bridge. Inspector Jennings came up with a slip of paper in his hand. He seemed upset.

'Read this. We must have a talk at once – not here, though. The ship's clerk has only just given me this telegram; he'd kept it in his office for an hour.'

Vriens, who couldn't help hearing, hadn't looked round or shown any sign of interest. The Captain opened the charthouse door, reading the telegram as he entered :

Inspector Jennings, S.S. Polarlys. Paris C.I.D. reports murderer of Marie Baron identified as Rudolf Silbermann engineer of Düsseldorf, Sternberg's nephew Stop The two crimes obviously connected Stop Probable Silbermann embarked on Polarlys at Hamburg under false name Stop Stavanger dock dragged without result Stop Intensify surveillance on board as case attracting much attention in Germany Stop Police, Stavanger.

'What do you make of it?' Jennings was obviously completely nonplussed. 'Is it possible the man's still hiding somewhere in the holds?'

Petersen read the telegram again, then went to the door, as the ship had just given a violent lurch.

'No. Ericksen's not on board now — that's a certainty. For one thing, the ship's been searched twice over — once by the Bergen police, who made a thorough job of it. Also, we've discharged practically all the cargo, and the holds provide no cover for a stowaway. Lastly, this fellow Ericksen has never been seen on board except by two people: Fräulein Storm and Vriens.'

'I thought you'd seen him too.'

'Two hours before we sailed I had a back view of a man in a grey overcoat. My Third Mate said it was Ericksen. But he had plenty of time to go on shore again.'

'Why should he? He'd paid his passage, his luggage was on board.'

'“Why” indeed! And there are a good many other “whys” about this business.'

'What port did he book to?'

'Stavanger.'

The Captain went out on to the bridge, frowning heavily, and asked the pilot :

'Have the hatch-covers been put on?'

Without replying, the man pointed to a livid yellowish-grey streak low on the horizon.

Petersen went back to the charthouse.

'Still, you checked all the passports, didn't you?' he said to the police officer.

Jennings, too, was beginning to look uneasy, not because he knew a gale was coming, but because the ship was beginning to roll more violently and he was already feeling a slight queasiness.

'We mustn't rely too much on the passports,' he remarked. 'It's almost impossible to know if a passport's genuine. In all large towns, especially in seaports like Hamburg, a regular trade goes on in false identity papers. Sometimes a passport is authentic, but stolen from its owner; sometimes an employee has been squared and issues one illegally.'

'So you think that Silbermann ...?'

'... may have come on board under a false name. Exactly. Ericksen, Vriens, Evjen, Schuttringer, or Krull.'

'We can leave Evjen out. I've known him for eight years.'

'That leaves us with four to choose from.'

'Less Ericksen, who, I'd swear to it, has never existed in flesh and blood.'

'Then why should Fräulein Storm and your Third Mate persist in saying they saw him on board?'

'And why that business of the sack of coal?' Petersen added in the same tone. 'And why these thefts? Why did

we find the bank-notes in Vriens's cabin, when there were dozens of places on the ship where he might have hidden them in perfect safety – and why only forty notes?’

A big sea swept over the bows and crashed upon the fo'c'sle; the Inspector tried to summon up a smile.

‘Have we run into a storm?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Do you mean ...?’

‘Look here! Suppose you made a search of Krull's quarters right away?’

‘Somewhere below, isn't it?’

‘Yes. His bunk is to the left of the engine-room. The Chief Engineer will show you the way.’

The temperature was falling with startling rapidity; so much so that the Captain gave an extra turn to the muffler round his neck.

Leaning over the rail, he saw four men lashing heavy tarpaulins over the hatches. But already it was too late. The ship, which had been under the lee of an island, now came out into the open, and was caught by a heavy sea just before the starboard beam.

She lurched abruptly, and a big ice-chest, which had not yet been lashed, broke the hooks securing it to the deck and slid over to port.

One man narrowly escaped being crushed to death. There was a moment of panic, for ten seconds later the ship had heeled right over to starboard, and the ice-chest, which was of heavy oak and lined with lead, started again careering across the deck.

Petersen hurried down the ladder, picked up a length of rope, and with the four men started in pursuit of the runaway. Just as they had it almost cornered, it broke loose

again and, snapping a shroud on its way, plunged overboard.

The first intimation of the accident was a long howl from the fo'c'sle.

The broken shroud had caught the unfortunate Lapp, who was still sitting on the capstan, full in the back, like a whiplash, and fractured one of his shoulder-blades. The man himself had no conception of what had happened, and this added to his terror.

'Carry him to a cabin. Look sharp about it. And fetch Mr Evjen.'

As there was no doctor at Kirkenes, Evjen had acquired some skill in first-aid work, in dealing with accidents at the mines he owned.

The *Polarlys* was now in the narrows between two islands, and the waves were comparatively small. But only a few cable lengths away, where the shelter of the islands ceased, the sea was running mountains high.

The Mate came up; he had been roused from sleep by the violent thuds on the fore-deck.

'Look after the injured man,' the Captain said to him. 'I must go back to the bridge.'

Vriens had not stirred. His shoulders pressed against the enamelled wall of the charthouse, he was staring straight ahead. His cap had blown away and long strands of fair hair were plastered by the gale across his forehead.

He had to keep his eyes half closed, to prevent himself from being blinded by the impact of the frozen spray.

The Captain, whose eyes were fixed on the compass, said: 'What's the matter now?'

Another spell of bad luck was beginning, like the one at

Hamburg. First the ice-chest running amok. Then the Laplander's accident.

And now he saw the small electric bulb that lit the compass flickering out. The filaments glowed for some moments a dull red, then went quite black.

He looked round to see if the same thing had happened to all the lights. The luminous haze which usually surrounded the ship was no longer visible.

'Slow the engines. Sixty revolutions. Got to find out what's happened.'

As he spoke the Mate came rushing up the ladder :

'The accumulators have run down suddenly. There must have been a short-circuit somewhere.'

'What about the dynamos?'

'The Chief's inspecting them.'

Petersen went down to the smoke-room, where the steward was lighting the two oil-lamps hung on gimbals. Her head buried in her hands, Katia was sitting by herself in a dark corner. It was impossible to see the expression on her face.

'Where's the Lapp?' the Captain asked the steward.

'In No. 1. Mr Evjen's with him.'

He could hear the man's shrieks when he was more than twenty yards away from the cabin. His sleeves rolled up, Evjen was passing his long white fingers over the man's back; their movements were as deft as a surgeon's.

'Is he badly injured?'

'The shoulder-blade's fractured right across. All I can do is to secure his back with a splint of some sort. You'll have to send him to hospital at Tromsø. When do we get there?'

'About midnight.'

'Have you any morphia?'

Though at first he didn't realize why the question affected him so unpleasantly, Petersen gave a slight start and even eyed the mine-owner with suspicion. A moment later he felt ashamed of himself for having unconsciously associated Evjen in his mind with the man who murdered Marie Baron.

Never had the atmosphere on board been so lugubrious. The corridors were dimly lit by oil-lamps; in the cabins there were candles only. His many-coloured garments strewn on the cabin floor, the Laplander was howling like an animal in pain. What made things worse was that every time the ship rolled, the wretched man was flung against the ship's side and his face grew contorted with agony.

By rights the Captain should have gone down to the engine-room to see how the Chief was getting on with the dynamos. But the knowledge that Vriens was alone with the pilot on the bridge made him uneasy. All sorts of ideas were flitting through his mind.

Let's hope Jennings doesn't fall down the ladder and fetch up against a crank-shaft.

Schuttringer seems to be lying low. What's he up to?

Is Krull at his post?

It was annoying to have these complications piling up just at the moment when the mystery looked like being cleared up — or, anyhow, there was at last something definite to go on.

On deck the Second Mate buttonholed him :

'We can't do with sixty revolutions. It's not enough to keep steerage-way on the ship.'

'I'm going up.'

He still hadn't lunched. Foreseeing a long spell of duty

on the bridge, he went down to his cabin and put on his wooden-soled sea-boots. Meeting the steward as he was coming up, he enquired :

'Seen Herr Schuttringer?'

'Yes, sir. I saw him on deck with someone a few minutes ago.'

'With whom? Was it the new trimmer?'

'It may have been. I didn't notice particularly.'

It couldn't be helped. Looking after his ship and at the same time tracking down a murderer were more than he could cope with. And his duty to his ship came first.

'Eighty revolutions ... a hundred,' he ordered as he approached the engine-room telegraph. 'Where exactly are we?'

'We should be picking up the Lödingen light at any moment now.'

The squalls were so violent that Petersen was constrained to follow Vriens and the pilot's example and shore himself up against the charthouse. Every time the ship gave a lurch, the three backs plunged forward simultaneously, then came back with a clang against the bulkhead.

For perhaps the twentieth time the Captain started observing Vriens from the corner of an eye, thinking: 'Silbermann, the man who murdered Marie Baron, von Sternberg's nephew and assassin - who is he?' Yes, Vriens might quite well be Silbermann. No one at Hamburg had set eyes on him before.

It could have been fixed up quite easily. A youngster's sent from Delfzijl to take up the post of Third Mate on the *Polarlys*. He is kidnapped or somehow detained *en route*. Silbermann impersonates him and comes on board.

'No!' the Captain suddenly exclaimed. 'That's out of the question.' He'd just remembered the group photograph of the training-ship cadets.

And yet, of all the people who might be Silbermann, wasn't it Vriens whose behaviour had been the most suspicious?'

For one thing, he was Katia's lover – and Katia was just the sort of person one would suspect of sharing in that tragic orgy of the Rue Delambre. Had they started their 'affair' on board – or did it date from before?

And why should the two of them have deliberately concocted the Ericksen legend, affirming that they'd seen the man about on the ship; only to dump him overboard at Stavanger, in the form of a sack of coal?

Lastly, Katia was practically penniless. A theft had taken place on board and the bulk of the stolen money had been found in her lover's cabin.

'There's a light, Captain.'

'One point to starboard. We'd better give the headland a wide berth.'

Again he started trying to sort out his ideas, and was annoyed to find he got no forrader. Like the men beside him, he was straining his eyes to pierce the darkness. The *Polarlys* was little more than two miles off the coast, and these waters were studded with reefs and little islands; the narrow channels between them seethed with conflicting currents, and they had to navigate by eye.

The great thing was to pick up in good time the white, green, or red lights winking on the perches of the light-buoys.

For a good half-hour the three men stayed thus, without exchanging a word. At last one of them pointed towards

the east, and a moment later the others saw the glimmer of a tiny light. A voice said :

'Stokmarknes ... Sortland.'

Suppose Vriens were Silbermann? The Captain had gone back to his reverie. His brows were deeply furrowed as he tried to sum up all that had happened, and interpret it in the light of this hypothesis.

Oddly enough, the proximity of the young man, whom now and then a sudden lurch of the ship flung against his shoulder, didn't trouble him in the least.

Suppose it were Krull? But why then had Krull told him of the trick played with the sack of coal? Could he have been lying? Had a man called, or giving himself the name of, Ericksen really jumped overboard that night?

True, his body hadn't been found; but that often happens in seaports. The corpse gets tangled up with an old table lying on the bottom, or is carried out to sea by the tide.

'Captain!'

Rudely awakened from his musings, Petersen gave a start. He saw the steward approaching him cautiously. The man was terrified by the way the ship was pitching, and still more by the foaming cataracts of water he saw hurtling past her side at what seemed a fantastic speed.

'It's about the Inspector, sir.'

'Where is he?'

'In his cabin. He's sick. He wants to see you at once.'

The Captain checked his course, glanced at Vriens and the pilot; then at the man at the wheel, a vague, ghost-like figure behind the thick glass windows of the wheelhouse.

Going down the ladder, he had a glimpse of Katia still seated in the smoke-room, under a lamp the glass of which had gone black.

It was like a bad dream. There was something phantasmagoric about all these strange people playing elusive parts, never coming out into the open or the light. That girl now – what was she up to in her corner? Crying? Or laughing up her sleeve? Or merely feeling sea-sick?

Never had he found the *Polarlys* so sinister. A hag-ridden ship! Even that ice-chest careering on the fore-deck had seemed possessed by an evil spirit!

Ninety-nine times out of a hundred that broken shroud wouldn't have harmed a soul. But, as ill-luck, or worse, would have it, that wretched Laplander had gone and planted himself on the capstan – an absurd place to choose considering the bitter wind, the deluges of spray, frozen before they touched the deck.

And the man didn't know a word of Norwegian. It was impossible to make him understand a thing! He kept on glaring at everyone as if he thought he were the victim of a fiendish plot!

Of course it had begun at Hamburg, with that chain which, likewise, had snapped, the pea-soup fog, Vriens's return to the ship dead-drunk, and the barge they'd all but sent to the bottom.

'Wonder what he's got to say?'

Petersen opened the Inspector's cabin door and found him bending over the pasteboard basin supplied to passengers afflicted with *mal de mer*.

There was only an inch or so of candle left. Its light fell on a haggard face, tearful eyes, parched lips.

'If only I could bring something up; it's this retching gets me down! What an awful storm!'

'So far it's nothing.'

'What! Do you mean to say ...?'

'You sent for me, didn't you?'

'Yes. Just a moment. I don't know what position to take. When I lie down it seems even worse. Are you quite certain there isn't any remedy? No, Captain, don't go. I went below. It's a wonder I didn't kill myself scrambling down those ladders. I searched Krull's bedding. And see what I found.'

He pointed to some gold coins lying on the wash-stand shelf, beside a damp towel.

'Mr Evjen,' he continued, 'has identified them. They're his all right.'

'Did Krull see you?'

'No, he wasn't there. I heard he'd gone on deck for a breath of air. Someone'll have to see to it that he doesn't bolt at Tromsø. Personally I'm afraid I shan't be up to it. You see the state I'm in.' He leant over the basin, retched several times. 'You see. It's no use. And my head's swimming. ... What's that?'

He had started, and was listening intently. They could hear a long-drawn roaring overhead.

'We've shipped a heavy sea, that's all.'

But Petersen, too, was worried. He knew that wave had hit the bridge.

'Don't be alarmed,' he said.

He started up to the deck, then changed his mind and went to the engine-room, where the Chief Engineer was still working on the dynamo.

'Fixed it up?'

'Nothing doing till we're in harbour.'

'Is Krull at his post?'

The Chief gave a shout towards the stokehold. A steel

door opened and a fireman's coal-grimed face appeared. There was a fine flow of expletives.

Krull, the man said, had been away for the last two hours — just when it was most important to keep the pressure up. The other trimmer couldn't manage it single-handed. Somebody must be sent down right away to help shift the coal.

'He's not in his bunk.'

'Not a sign of him anywhere.'

'I'll send you one of the deck-hands,' the Captain said.

The engine-room looked as eerie as the rest of the ship. In the dim light of oil-lamps bat-like figures were flitting to and fro, performing feats of balance whenever the ship rolled, to avoid being caught in the machinery.

As Petersen set foot on deck he, too, let out a volley of oaths. He had a feeling that a hearty outburst of profanity might steady down his nerves. He hailed the first man he came across.

'Go and give a hand in the stokehold.'

'But, sir, I'm on duty ...'

'Do as I tell you, blast it!'

It wasn't the moment for explanations, anyhow. By stooping he could see the red light marking the Risotys-hamm reef. Evjen, who had evidently been hunting for him, came up. He, too, looked under the weather. Round his nostrils were sallow streaks, tokens of impending seasickness.

'Just a moment, Captain. A queer thing has just happened. As I told you, I gave the injured man a hypodermic injection, to ease the pain a bit. The steward brought me the medicine-chest and I left it in the cabin.'

'Has he poisoned himself?' Petersen was prepared for

anything, the most improbable mischances, now that another run of bad luck had set in so strongly.

'No. There was a box with six tubes of morphia. It's vanished. So has the syringe.'

'Did anyone go into the cabin?'

'Only the Lapp could tell me that. Unfortunately he doesn't understand a word one says. He seems to think we want to murder him, and cowers in the corner of his bunk when anyone comes in.'

'Did the steward see anything?'

'He says he was on the bridge.'

'Right!'

Petersen dragged himself up the ladder. By the time he reached Vriens and the pilot he was soaked through; a big sea had landed on his back when he was half-way up.

Without a word he wedged himself between them, against the bulkhead. With a curious glint of irony in his eyes he watched a huge wave come charging over the side, and climb so high that it carried away one of the falls of a lifeboat hung from davits just abreast the funnel.

Midnight found him still standing there, perished with cold, his teeth clenched, gazing ahead into the darkness.

For three hours he hadn't been able to smoke, as he'd have had to take his hands from his pockets, unbutton his coat and go into the wheelhouse to strike a match.

Icicles were hanging from the shrouds and derrick-stays; successive waves had gradually built up a blue, translucent dome of ice like a gigantic jellyfish sprawling on the fo'c'sle.

CHAPTER X

Tromsø

‘VRIENS!’

The young man turned rather slowly, though after so many hours’ silence the voice in his ears must have taken him by surprise.

‘Krull’s disappeared. He may have left the ship at Svolvær.’

Conscious of the hardness of his gaze, Petersen felt some compunction when he saw the young man’s face. It was deeply lined with fatigue, more sad than anxious; but there was a touch of manliness that had been lacking until now.

The Captain’s plan had been to startle Vriens into making some hasty, self-revealing remark. Now he realized that this was not the time or place for it. On his right the pilot, swathed in heavy furs, was peering into the darkness so intently that it seemed a wonder he did not begin to see lights where none existed. In his glass shelter the quartermaster was grasping the wheel, almost dropping with fatigue, his eyes glued on the compass.

Every ten seconds or so the *Polarlys* staggered under the impact of a mountainous sea, and it was all the men on the bridge could do to keep their footing.

Three successive waves sent bursts of foaming water round the red-and-white bands at the summit of the funnel. The third carried away the lifeboat that was hanging by one davit only; it vanished in the swirling darkness.

‘Captain!’ Obviously something unusual had attracted the pilot’s attention. ‘Can you make out what they’re saying

yonder?' He pointed straight ahead. After some moments the Captain made out some pin-point lights twinkling on the horizon.

'Tromsö already?' He sounded surprised.

'Aye, that's Tromsö. But I could swear they're telling us to keep out to sea. Didn't you see? Look, they're starting again. Three whites. One red. One white.'

Vriens corrected him in a toneless voice.

'Two whites.'

'But what came next? Did you see?'

The Captain had stepped forward to the rail, which he was gripping with both hands. Nevertheless he almost fell backwards when a volley of spray caught him full in the face.

'Stop!' he ordered. 'I'm not quite sure yet, but ...'

The signal-station on shore kept flashing intermittently, repeating the same message over and over again.

'We must answer them. I'll wager our lanterns aren't ready!'

He regretted the remark. Already Vriens, on his own initiative, had rushed to the wheelhouse and was lighting a lamp.

'Reply: O.K.,' the Captain said, then turned to the pilot, who had come beside him. 'They're telling us to stop outside. The channel's blocked by a trawler that went aground a few hours ago and is lying right across it.'

He rang *Slow Ahead*, then *Half Speed*, on the engine-room telegraph.

Again all was darkness. Then a faint glow showed near by and the *Polarlys* gave three long blasts of her whistle.

Tromsö lay on the left behind a barrier of rocks with a channel only just wide enough to take a ship of moderate

size. The clanking of a crane could be heard. Evidently they were trying to shift the wrecked trawler.

Almost imperceptibly the current was carrying the *Polarlys* towards the reef. The engines were started again, then stopped, but this was not enough to prevent the ship from being taken abeam, and it was all they could do to get her on her course again.

The Second Mate came hastily on to the bridge.

'They'll have to send a launch out with the mail,' Petersen said to him. 'Get a Jacob's ladder ready. See that the Lapp is taken down it as gently as possible.'

He was almost glad of this new misadventure, for he knew everybody at Tromsö, and the local agent of the B.D.S. was a jovial little fellow. He'd have had to have a talk with him, shake hands with all and sundry, and just now he was in no mood for such amenities. The chug-chug of the motor-launch was audible long before its light was seen approaching aft. Then came a series of irritating manoeuvres. *Slow Ahead. Stop. Half Speed Astern. Slow. Half Speed Ahead.*

Bringing the launch alongside was no easy matter, but finally they managed to make her fast. Two men in sou'westers clambered on deck. Petersen went forward to meet them and shook hands.

'How did it happen?'

'A brand-new trawler with a slap-up Diesel engine on her first voyage to the cod-fisheries south of Spitsbergen. Naturally they hadn't a pilot – those Germans are so cocksure of themselves and their charts! With the result, of course, that they piled themselves up in the narrows.'

'Anybody drowned?'

'Yes, a youngster of fifteen who jumped overboard when

they crashed. There's a great pow-wow going on to decide whether to blow her up with dynamite or try to pull her off.'

A postal employee brought the mail-bags. Three men carried the Lapp towards the ladder. It was impossible to make him understand what was being done, and he struggled fiercely, squealing like a pain-crazed animal.

'Get him into hospital as quick as you can.'

Taking him down the Jacob's ladder was a touch-and-go business. Finally he broke loose six feet from the deck of the launch, fell headlong on it, and lay there stunned.

'I suppose you know that one can't see your lights a cable's length away?' the skipper of the launch remarked.

'I'm quite aware of it,' Petersen grunted.

'You'd better mind out. There's two English colliers coming down from Kirkenes tonight.'

'Really?'

He was in a hurry to get away. The *Polarlys* was being carried dangerously near the town, the lights of which could now be seen across the frost-mist.

Snow was falling again in tiny flakes that seared the skin and wormed their way into clothes and sea-boots.

The Captain had kept a watchful eye on the launch. As it was shoving off he counted up the shadowy figures on board before giving the signal to start.

It was Vriens who had to handle the ship, and Petersen listened with a touch of anxiety. But the propeller began to revolve at the correct moment. As the *Polarlys* came clear of the launch she headed two points to starboard, the telegraph clanged for eighty, and so on up to a hundred and twenty revolutions.

The Captain pictured the youngster on the bridge, his fingers clenched on the telegraph handle, his eyes fixed on

the darkness in which nothing showed but the white crests of waves immediately ahead.

Instead of going to the bridge Petersen entered the saloon, where he found the steward lying on a wall-sofa, looking more dead than alive.

'Laid out, eh?'

'You know, sir, how I am. I can stand a bit of rough weather. But this sort of thing's too much for me.'

'Seen anyone?'

'Mr Evjen rang for a bottle of soda-water just now.'

'Sick?'

'Pretty near. But he's holding out. He was going to lie down a bit, he said.'

'What about the others?'

'I don't know how they're doing, sir. Just now I saw the Inspector coming out of his cabin, but he had to go back at once. He's got it worse than me.'

The lamp in the corridor had been turned low, as the glass was cracked. Acting on a sudden impulse, the Captain walked to Schuttringer's cabin. About to knock, he changed his mind, opened the door, and halted on the threshold.

The German was sitting on the edge of his bunk. A glance at the basin on the floor was enough to show the Captain that he, too, had succumbed.

'When shall we be in Tromsö? Why did the ship stop just now?'

'We've passed Tromsö.'

'What's that you say?' He sprang to his feet and glared at Petersen. At that moment he looked almost dangerous. 'Do you mean to say we've passed Tromsö without stopping?'

The candle shed a feeble light. But even so, beads of

sweat could be seen oozing out from the German's deeply furrowed forehead.

'Yes. The channel's blocked by a sunken trawler.'

'But surely —?'

'The mail's been brought out on a launch. We shall discharge the cargo on our return voyage.'

For the first time the man had lost his apathetic air; he seemed greatly put out.

'I'd like to know,' he growled, 'how far the Company has the right ...'

'Did you intend to land at Tromsö?'

'No. To send off a wire.'

'If you'd let me know, the postman who came on board could have taken it. ... I suppose you wanted money sent you from Germany?' he added as an afterthought.

The German making no reply, the Captain continued:

'In that case I think I can reassure you; your money will be discovered before long. Some gold coins have been found already in the mattress of one of our bunker-hands. And the man himself is in hiding somewhere on the ship.'

'Thanks,' said Schuttringer curtly, reaching towards the door-knob.

Petersen walked up the corridor, staring at the floor. Each time a particularly heavy sea crashed on the ship he gave a slight start. Had enough men been available, he would have given orders to track down Krull immediately, for he had no doubt the man was still on board.

Slowly he climbed the companion-way. The smoke-room was in almost total darkness, but as he passed it he had a glimpse of a pale face turning towards him.

'Captain!'

Katia's voice. It had still a nervous intonation. Without replying, he halted in the doorway.

'Please listen. I absolutely must speak to Vriens — if only for a moment. He's on the bridge, isn't he?' As he still kept silent she went on: 'Please don't refuse. ... He didn't steal that money, I assure you, Captain. ... Things can't go on like this. ... Have we left Tromsö?'

'We've passed Tromsö without putting in.'

She rose to her feet, took a quick step towards him. At that moment she looked like a figure in a dream. The black dress merged into the encircling darkness; the wavering lamplight distorted her features out of all recognition.

Petersen noticed that the slight rash on her forehead had gone an angry red. And that her lips were parched, cracking with fever.

'You can't mean it!' she cried. 'Why ever didn't we stop at Tromsö? Where do we stop next?'

'At Hammerfest tomorrow morning.'

She clutched his arm with trembling fingers.

'But that means ...' She passed her hand across her brows, and asked him in a small, forlorn voice: 'Please tell me, who are still on board?'

'Everyone. No, there's a trimmer missing. A fellow called Krull.'

He observed her keenly. He was fretting with impatience; by rights he should be on the bridge. Would Vriens and the pilot sight the Skjaervoy light, one of the trickiest to pick up, in time?

And yet he realized that the moment was crucial. The girl was at the end of her tether. These last few hours of storm and mental stress had worn her out; she was on the point of giving in.

Only he knew he must go slow. One incautious remark might spoil everything, stiffen her against him.

His coat was soaked through, he was dripping with water, and in the huge sea-boots his legs looked like stout black pillars.

'If you like, I can take a message to Mr Vriens. As the stolen property was found in his cabin, he's practically under arrest. At Hammerfest I shall have to hand him over to —'

'No, no!' she broke in impulsively. 'Don't do that. ... Let *me* speak to him. Wait! Let me think!'

She looked desperately round her as if trying to find something to cling to, or a loophole of escape.

'He'll be sent up for theft to start with,' the Captain said. 'Then he'll have to prove that he has nothing to do with a man called Silbermann ...'

She drew back a step. Her eyes bored into his.

'What's that you say?'

'I'm referring to Sternberg's nephew, the man responsible for Marie Baron's death. Rudolf Silbermann, an engineer at Düsseldorf, who is travelling on this ship under a false name.'

She sat down. The Captain was startled by the sudden change that had come over her. She now appeared quite composed, unnaturally so. Her chin was cupped between her hands, her elbows resting on the table, on which stood an empty bottle. She was staring at the floor.

'What else do you know?'

Her hair was straggling over her face; she tossed it back, then unthinkingly fumbled in her bag for a cigarette. But evidently she ~~had left her~~ cigarette-case in the cabin.

Just then the ship gave such a lurch that she would have

toppled over, chair and all, had she not clung to the table. Even Petersen had to cling to the doorpost.

The siren started blaring. The Captain was itching to be on the bridge. Stamped on his retina was the picture of the tumbling waste of waters across which he should now be watching for the Skjaervoy light.

He allowed himself half a minute more.

'Silbermann,' he said, 'fled from Paris to Hamburg. He had a woman with him. He embarked on the *Polarlys* and did his utmost to cover up his tracks. He even invented a non-existent passenger.'

'You don't mean to say so!' She gave a nervous laugh.

'Since we left Hamburg he's been trying every trick to throw us off the scent. And the woman with him has been seconding him. He killed Sternberg. Quite possibly, now that he realizes he's cornered, he'll try to commit another ...'

'Stop!'

Already her calm had broken down. With her nails she was tearing into strips a dainty pale-blue handkerchief.

'Please let me speak to Vriens, Captain. Or else ... No, it's useless. Everything's useless *now*!'

'Silbermann's your lover, isn't he?'

'Stop! Go away!'

'Answer me first.'

'No, go away. You've got it all wrong!'

'Who is Silbermann?'

She was in such a state of nerves that the slightest touch would have made her jump as if she had been stung. Her cracked lips kept on moving as though she were trying to speak but couldn't get the words out. At last she muttered brokenly:

'What's the good. It's too late.'

'Too late? But supposing it enabled us to prevent another crime ...?'

'I beg you, leave me alone. For pity's sake! I swear to you I ... No, what's the good? Tell Vriens ... He's innocent – of the theft as well – you *must* believe me. Tell him that ...' – she fumbled for the words, gazing distractedly about her – '... that it's all over. That he can ...'

'Can what?'

'Nothing. I don't know. Can't you see I'm played out; I'm in pain, I'm ...? Do please go away. There's nothing, nothing, nothing to be done!'

Covering her face with her folded arms, she collapsed on the wall-sofa, sobbing convulsively.

The siren was blaring again with a peculiar insistence. Yet, looking down at Katia's black form and faintly glimmering hair, Petersen lingered a moment more.

There was no question of his staying with her, but it struck him that she ought not to be left alone in her present state, and he thought of asking Evjen to come and keep her company.

But that would have meant going down to the cabins, and there was no time to lose.

He hurried towards the bridge. Two waves caught him full in the chest on his way to the ladder. When he was alongside the wheelhouse, Vriens came up to him excitedly and gasped in his ear:

'Listen, sir! Over there!' He pointed. 'You can hear their engines. They answered us twice. Since then I can't get a sound out of them.'

His hand was still clenched on the siren lanyard. Snow was falling so *thickly* that there was little hope of seeing the other steamer's lights in time to avoid a collision.

Petersen rang down: 'Sixty revolutions.' Then, 'Forty.'

Even the pilot, who had been thirty years on the run, was showing signs of anxiety.

'Those Englishmen,' he growled. 'What the devil are they up to? Don't they know the regulations?'

But for the gale the Englishmen in question would have heard what he was saying, for at that precise moment a red light sped past the *Polarlys* not thirty yards away. Across the driven snowflakes they could see an ace of spades on a white funnel, a brilliantly lit poop.

Oblivious of the water streaming down his clothes, Vriens mopped his brows with a sodden handkerchief – as if the feel of sweat were less endurable than that of spray – and conjured up a feeble smile.

Petersen was close enough to catch the sound of a stifled sob, and understood. ... Something that was most vital in him, his inborn sense of seamanship, was deeply stirred. It was the lad's first voyage. Alone, his nerves strung taut, for twenty interminable minutes, he had been confronting the menace of that big collier heading straight towards him through the darkness and blinding snow.

The red light had flashed past them like a shooting star.

Now, Petersen guessed, Vriens felt his legs giving way beneath him under the influence of an emotion with which the Captain was familiar – retrospective fear.

A stifled sob.

Vriens put the handkerchief back in his pocket, leaned back against the charthouse, and began peering again into the darkness.

'Vriens!' Petersen was sorry he had spoken when he saw the pale, drawn face that turned to him mistrustfully.

And he'd have liked to say something kind. Not so much kind as encouraging.

He hadn't yet solved the problem, but he had an inkling of the part his Third Mate had played.

'Yes, sir?' The young man's voice was hoarse.

All Petersen found to say was :

'The siren. Every thirty seconds. *Two* colliers were due to pass us. There's another behind.'

No, he couldn't find the words he'd have wished to say, and his ineffectiveness humiliated him. Still, it's no easy thing to blurt out like that, particularly under such conditions: 'You know, I have confidence in you' — or some such paternal remark!

Especially as he might quite likely have gone on to say: 'Forgive me for having talked to you so roughly. But —' No, in the midst of a snowstorm, when one's legs are frozen stiff, it's easier to rap out :

'The siren. Every thirty seconds.'

There was a long-drawn stridence overhead. Vriens was carrying out the order.

CHAPTER XI

Man Overboard

EIGHT bells of the morning watch. The mountain peaks were growing visible against the greyness of the sky when the lull began. Already for some hours the gale had been abating. But the Atlantic was still running high, ridged with long streaks of foam.

At last the *Polarlys* turned and entered a sheltered chan-

nel. Though the wind still whistled through the shrouds it seemed like a dead calm.

The three men on the bridge were utterly worn out; their eyes were smarting and their backs ached as if they had been carrying a crushing load all night.

The Captain's first gesture was to take his pipe from his pocket. It had become choked with tiny snow-crystals, and before lighting it he tapped them out against the rail.

'The Second Mate's had a sleep,' he said to Vriens, who was summoning up all his will-power to keep himself from swaying with fatigue. 'He'll relieve us.'

'Very good, sir.'

Petersen glanced at the compass and revolution indicator, then at the dark bulk of his ship, which was emerging from the gloom, crusted from end to end with ice.

Followed by the young man, he walked towards the ladder, standing aside at the ladder-head to let him go down first.

Looking down, Vriens murmured tentatively :

'Captain ...' He evidently realized that Petersen's expression was encouraging, even friendly, and this seemed to make him still more nervous. 'Is it a fact that Krull went ashore at Svolvær?'

'I doubt it. I'm more inclined to think he's somewhere on board. I'll have a search made presently.'

Abruptly, placing his hand on the young man's shoulder, he asked :

'Is he her husband? Or her lover?'

Vriens dropped his eyes again; then looked up timidly. After a moment he replied in a low voice :

'No. Her brother. ... But *she* is innocent.'

'Come along.'

Petersen followed him down the ladder and opened the smoke-room door. The scene before them filled both men with dismay, they hardly dared to meet each other's eyes.

One of the oil lamps was still burning, a smudge of yellow in the bleak grey light. The bottle of soda-water lay broken on the floor. On the wall-sofa Katia lay asleep at last. Had they not heard the low sound of her breathing they might have thought her dead.

All the prettiness had left her face; it was deeply scored with lines of weariness. Her hair was plastered on her clammy forehead. One arm dangled limply over the side of the couch. Even in sleep she had a haunted, uneasy expression. Her lips had the wry twist that comes of sea-sickness.

Vriens looked away. Taking him by the arm, Petersen led him to his own cabin, where the storm had wrought some minor havoc, such as upsetting an ink-bottle on the linoleum.

The Captain pressed the bell-button, saying to Vriens: 'Sit down.'

He realized that the young man was still on the defensive, but that his resistance was gradually breaking down. Vriens sank on to the bunk with a deep sigh of lassitude.

The steward knocked; he had already put on a clean coat. His hair still bore the marks of the comb he had just run through it.

'Go and tell the Mate I expect him to find Krull, without fail.'

As the door closed he turned to Vriens.

'Well, that's the end of the story, isn't it? He guessed we were on his tracks. I expect he meant to leave the ship at Tromsø, but as luck would have it, we didn't put in there. And his sister, too, knows the game is up.'

He held out his tobacco-pouch. Vriens shook his head.

'Thanks, sir. I only smoke cigarettes.'

The pale light flooding through the porthole made them look ghastlier than ever.

'So, Vriens, at last you can speak freely. I know you aren't a murderer, and that you didn't steal Evjen's or Schutteringer's money. Still, I'm afraid, as things are, I shall have to hand you over to the police when we make port. The killer's given us a long run, but we've cornered him at last. He'll be brought here any moment now.'

He had taken a seat facing Vriens; a wisp of smoke was curling up from his pipe.

'It was at Hamburg, wasn't it, you got to know her? Or had you met her before?'

'Will they arrest her too? Tell me, Captain: is it a crime trying to save one's brother's life?'

A picture was still hovering before the eyes of both – of the girl as they had just seen her, utterly prostrated by the turn of events, with all desire to attract, even the simple plea of womanhood, abandoned.

Vriens's eyelashes fluttered. 'I love her,' he said deliberately.

'Was it at the *Krystall*?'

'No. I'd just left the train. It was late, and as I didn't know my way about the harbour I went to an hotel for the night. I didn't notice her at first. The night porter, a Dutchman, asked me my name and so on to enter up in the register. Then out of curiosity he asked me more questions. I told him I'd come to join a ship as Third Mate. It was only when we'd finished that I saw her sitting in the lobby, listening. She asked me for a light ...'

He fell silent, made a despondent gesture.

'No, you can't understand ...'

This time the Captain's smile was frankly affectionate.

'You got to know her. You went out together.'

'She's so different from other women. I don't know how to explain it.'

Petersen could picture it so well – a youngster fresh from the training ship suddenly thrown into contact with a woman of Katia's type. What wonder if he lost his head completely?

'What did she ask you to do?'

'First of all, to let her brother take my place and join the ship under my name. She made no secret of the fact that he'd got into trouble in Paris. He takes drugs. You know what happened. A girl died at one of their dope parties. He ran away. First to Brussels, where a friend gave him some money. Then to Hamburg. But I couldn't do what she wanted, could I? I told her it was out of the question. I tried to get away from her. I was afraid of seeing her again in case I should be tempted ...'

'Then she came on board as a passenger.'

'Yes. I hadn't seen her brother. I suspected he'd come on board as well. When Ericksen disappeared I thought it was he.'

'But Katia undecieved you, I suppose?'

'Yes, she told me it was a trick her brother had thought of, so that if the police got on his tracks suspicion would fall on an imaginary passenger. A friend of his came on board in the morning in a grey overcoat and booked a passage to Stavanger under the name of Ericksen, and left some luggage in the cabin. After that he went back quietly on shore.'

'What about Sternberg's death?'

Vriens had buried his head between his hands.

'I don't know. ... She told me she couldn't believe her brother'd done it. She asked me to fix things up so to make it seem that Ericksen had jumped overboard. You see the idea? It would prevent further enquiries being made on the ship. It was I who filled the sack of coal. I'd thought of going away with her when she landed. Did I tell you, their idea of landing at Kirkenes was to get through to Russia? They both speak Russian; their mother used to live at Petrograd. The frontier in those parts isn't so closely watched, and there's no extradition in Russia.'

There was now no need to put questions. He was all eagerness to unburden himself.

'I had all sorts of wild ideas even then. No, you can't possibly understand, Captain. ... There were moments when I could almost have brought myself to kill you, for I'd a feeling you were going to hit upon the truth sooner or later.'

'Didn't she tell you who her brother was?'

'No. Not because she didn't trust me. But it made things easier for me, not knowing. I started watching everyone — Evjen, Schuttringer, and especially Krull, whom I often saw hanging about on deck. I knew that neither of them had any money. When the thefts took place I understood.'

'I suspected something would happen before we reached Kirkenes. And Katia told me after we'd left Stavanger that her brother would try to get ashore by himself at Svolvær or Tromsø.'

'To gain time, somebody else had to be suspected — myself!'

Suddenly he rose to his feet excitedly.

'I *must* see her, sir. I swear to you, by the memory of my mother, that she, anyhow, isn't guilty of any crime. She was only trying to save her brother. ... Do you remember, sir, when she said it was her birthday? That wasn't true. She was worried because she'd just learnt that there were doubts if Ericksen had ever existed and about the story of a man jumping overboard. She wanted to take people's minds off the subject. That's why she gave the party. But nobody seemed to respond. She felt terrible about it!'

'So your mother's dead, Vriens?'

'Yes, sir. She died in Java.'

'And you're an only child. I saw your father's photo in your kit. Don't forget you're all he has in the world now. ...' He stopped abruptly, led the young man towards the door. 'I think you'd better go and have a sleep while we finish off this wretched business.'

'No, sir. I'd rather stay with you.'

'Very well. But promise me to be a man. Don't forget the uniform you're wearing. Last night ...'

'Last night?'

'Well, I was very satisfied with you. You did credit to your training ship.'

The ghost of a smile rose to Vriens's lips; he turned away to conceal it.

'So now it's up to you to carry on as you did on the bridge. Come along.'

For a moment Petersen had the impression that someone had been listening at the door. However, when he opened it he saw only Schuttringer at the far end of the corridor, pacing up and down and looking in the other direction. As Vriens and the Captain came on deck they heard a shout.

'There he is! In the boat.'

The First Mate rushed past them. They saw him run up the ladder and dive round the funnel.

Only three of the four lifeboats remained. As the First Mate approached, the tarpaulin covering one of these was pushed up and Krull thrust his head out.

'Right you are!' he said.

Petersen glanced at Vriens, whose face looked drawn and wizened, like an old man's.

'Come down. Take your hands out of your pockets.' The Mate sounded a little flustered as he gave the order.

The men on the deck had an impression that Krull was smiling to himself.

'Not at Hammerfest yet?' he asked.

No one replied. A scared face, the steward's, peered from a doorway.

'Is the Inspector about?' the Captain asked.

'Yes, sir, I saw him leaving his cabin a moment ago.'

Just then Jennings appeared and announced triumphantly:

'I've been sick, Captain!'

Though still rather shaky on his legs, he was beaming. Then he saw Krull coming down the ladder, followed by the Second Mate and a seaman.

'Ah, you've caught him. What shall we ...?' He couldn't bring himself to say 'What shall we do with him?' but gazed at Petersen as if asking for a lead.

Only the trimmer had a cheerful air. All the others were feeling dog-tired, aching in every limb. Red-rimmed eyes, lips parched and blue with cold. Nobody had shaved.

As Krull was passing the smoke-room the door opened and Katia peeped out. She looked deathly pale in the grey

light that came, not from above, but from the snowy slopes of a mountain by which the ship was passing.

Katia stared dully at Krull, then, catching sight of Vriens, hastily averted her eyes.

After a moment's hesitation Petersen murmured :

'Take him to the smoke-room.'

Krull turned into it of his own accord, ran his fingers through his rumpled hair, then stroked his beard, which was nearly two inches long.

'Will you take over the watch?'

The First Mate nodded and started off towards the bridge while the Captain shepherded Vriens and the Inspector into the smoke-room, closing the door behind them.

There was a pause. Jennings and the Captain eyed each other uncertainly. Which of them was to do the talking?

Katia had retreated to the far end of the room. Suddenly they saw her pressing her face to one of the portholes.

'Rudolf Silbermann, I arrest you.' The police officer's voice was all the more lacking in assurance as the smile still lingered on his prisoner's lips.

At the same moment there was a stifled shriek. Vriens ran to another porthole and shouted : 'Captain !'

A sound of running feet on the promenade-deck.

From where he was, Petersen had only an imperfect view of what was happening, but he had a glimpse of a man swinging himself over the rail and vanishing from sight.

He opened the door and, leaning forward, saw a shaven head bobbing up and down in the water. The third time he saw it the head was already far astern.

'Stop!' he yelled towards the bridge. 'Full Astern!'

But the First Mate didn't catch the order and, cupping his hand behind his ear, asked to have it repeated.

Krull was heard in the background, counselling :

'Let him be, poor devil !'

'Stop !'

The water boiled round the propeller as the *Polarlys* shuddered to a standstill. But when they scanned the wake with field-glasses nothing could be seen but a white lather of foam.

It had all happened so quickly that no single one of the onlookers had seen more than a fragment of the incident.

As they gazed at each other in uneasy stupefaction Evjen came strolling towards them, looking very spick and span. He had just shaved. There was a neat crease to his grey trousers, his shoes were immaculate.

'What's up? Why have we stopped?'

Leaning over the bridge-rail, the officer of the watch awaited orders.

After a moment Petersen shouted to him :

'Ahead! Full Ahead!'

Katia hadn't fainted, but there was a glint of desperation in her eyes as she gazed at the waves which were beginning again to race past the ship's sides.

'Take her away, Vriens. But ... no nonsense, please.' The expression on Petersen's face was so understanding that the young man wanted to thank him. But he couldn't find the words, and conveyed his gratitude as best he could by an affectionate look.

The Captain took off, 'almost tore off, his overcoat. Though the temperature was well below freezing-point he was bathed in sweat.

'Come in, Evjen. Shut the door.'

The oil-lamp was still burning in the smoke-room where

the four of them now were gathered. Krull was the first to speak.

'Well, have you tumbled to it?'

'You mean that Silbermann ...?' Jennings began innocently.

'You saw him jump overboard, didn't you? ... I'd had enough of it. ... So there you are!'

'Keep quiet!' Petersen broke in, then added in a curt, peremptory tone: 'You told me you used to be a lawyer. ...'

'Used to be, yes. If you want to make sure, get the police to show you the list of my previous convictions. I played the fool. Anyhow, you'll admit I never set up to be a plaster saint. I got into trouble over opium and cocaine. That was the start. After that I went downhill hell for leather. Did spells at Cologne and Mannheim. And there's no climbing back once a man's touched rock-bottom. But you wouldn't understand what that means, however much you try. ...'

'Let's get down to brass tacks. I'm not Silbermann; my name is Krull all right. I took a job on the *Polarlys* as I was down and out.

'No mystery about that. It wasn't till I'd looked around a bit, in fact after Sternberg's death, that I noticed something queer was happening on board.

'Then I found a French paper lying about in which a dope case was reported. And while you all were groping in the dark, I'd spotted it. When one takes dope oneself, one knows the signs.

'Did you ever have a good look at Schuttringer's face? That little twitch here – see where I mean? – there's no mistaking it. He did all he could – shaved his head, wore spectacles with which he couldn't see, tried to change his appearance – but *that* he couldn't hide.'

Krull pointed to his lower jaw, then started moving it in little rabbit-like jerks.

'So I knew at once he took drugs. And as I hadn't set eyes on cocaine for quite three weeks I tackled friend Schuttringer and put him on the spot. He had only twelve small packets left; I let him keep two of them.

'What? So you still don't follow? ... Same as you don't know how to question people. You've got to speak their language if you want to make 'em talk.

'To an addict you talk dope. Anyhow, I can tell you, when I let fall Marie Baron's name, Schuttringer sat up all right!

'You saw him at his physical jerks and the rest of it. Well, that by itself would have been enough to tell me the man was trying to throw dust in people's eyes. Because a fellow who goes in for snow doesn't behave like that. He was a faker — I saw that at once.

'He was trying to look just the opposite of what he really was. That's what everybody does who wants to cover his tracks.

'I pieced it all together bit by bit. First that he was the young lady's brother. She doesn't dope as much as he. But she's no novice.

'Also that he was half crazy because he'd killed his uncle. Scared blue. Capable of doing anything to save his skin.'

None of them dreamt of interrupting, though everything about the man got on their nerves. On Evjen's especially, whose spruceness made a striking contrast with the seedy appearance of the man who had touched rock-bottom.

'They found that young fool Vriens very useful. In that business of the coal-sack, for instance. For, mind you,

Silbermann had brains. Only he was too soft; he thought too much about his social status. If he'd had the guts to sail for South America as an emigrant or a stoker, he'd have brought it off.

'Still, I admit, one has to get broken in by degrees. Why, it takes quite a time getting used to going out without a collar on!

'That was a neat piece of work – getting a friend to come and book a passage and then disappear at once. Suppose Uncle Sternberg hadn't had suspicions and come on board, it would have panned out perfectly. Or even if you'd only heard about Silbermann's being on the ship when we'd got as far as Stavanger or Bergen. In that case, everyone'd have thought of Ericksen at once and left the other passengers in peace.

'Strange that a fellow should be capable of thinking it all out so well, and then ... Nerves gave way, most likely. A queer mixture of funk and daring he must have been.

'In Paris when that girl passed out he didn't leave a trace behind him. He reckoned that it would take some days before the police could get in touch with his pal Feinstein.

'When he got to Brussels he hadn't a sou, I gather, and the police took him into custody. Still, somehow he raised enough to pay his fare to Hamburg, where he scrounged some more out of his uncle. The trouble was to make his getaway in time. Getting false passports, for instance, when one doesn't know the ropes, is a longish business.

'And at any moment a wire might come from Paris. A whole week went by. All that waiting must have got him badly rattled, and when Sternberg came on board he lost his head completely. That was a fool's trick killing his uncle. In my opinion, Sternberg had seen the papers,

guessed the truth, and come to help him out, as he didn't want his family mixed up in a scandal.

'Just nerves. Dope too, perhaps. In a tight corner one's apt to overdo it.

'I wangled it from him quite nicely. I saw him getting more jumpy every day. But what really put the wind up him was when he realized you'd spotted that trick with the sack of coal.

'He was still short of money. He stole some and had the bright idea of saying he'd been robbed himself of all he had.

'His plan was to reach Kirkenes at all costs and to avert suspicion till we got there. For that he counted on the youngster, who'd fallen badly for his sister.

'But at Svolvær he had a nasty jar; he saw a telegram delivered to the Inspector. That put the lid on it; he determined to clear off at Tromsø and leave his sister to fend for herself. So he came to see me about it.

'You see, he had to make sure you'd let him off the ship. And you didn't seem really convinced that the officer was guilty. So it lay between us, Schuttringer and myself; one of us was Silbermann.

'He gave me a thousand crowns to let myself be suspected for twenty-four hours. Here they are. ...

'What was I risking? A short spell in jail. I've done twenty months in clink, and it's not much worse than the stokehold.

'I shoved the gold coins into my bunk and went and hid in one of the ship's boats.

'If the *Polarlys* had put in at Tromsø the plan would have come off. You'd have arrested me, but in the long run I'd have proved I wasn't Silbermann. With the money he'd have got clean away and settled down somewhere under a false name. There's ships leaving Narvik daily.

When I heard we weren't stopping at Tromsø, I thought of showing up. But then I decided to let him have a run for his money.'

'Unbelievable!' muttered Evjen, who had been scrutinizing the curious specimen of humanity before him with steadily increasing interest.

'There's nothing unbelievable about it,' Krull retorted. 'I dare say for people of your sort, with a wife and kids, and no vices, it's a bit of an eye-opener. But only let me take you in hand for a couple of months and, I'll warrant you, you'll be ready to commit a dozen murders to get a pinch of dope. ... That fellow had bad luck. And he went too far. It's a mug's game bringing young girls to dope parties. ... Then he got it into his head that he was cornered. And when a man thinks he's cornered, he'll stick at nothing.'

He glanced towards the porthole and shrugged his shoulders.

'Well, well,' he concluded, 'his troubles are over. ... Want me to go below and start shovelling coal?'

CHAPTER XII

Elsie Silberman

THE day drew to a dismal close. The scenery in itself was enough to create an atmosphere of gloom. The ship was passing through a series of narrow channels leading into each other like the galleries in a mole's burrow. And the clouds hung so low as to seem like the lid of an hermetically closed box.

White mountains. A night-black sea, flecked with glints

of grey. Here and there, in the far distance, a lonely house standing on piles, with a small pine-wood boat moored in the creek below it.

After ironically saluting his listeners Krull had gone back to duty.

The three men – Petersen, Jennings, and Evjen – had settled down in the saloon under the steward's nervous eye. Unwittingly the Inspector had taken Schüttringer's seat, and several times the others, when addressing him, hastily looked away.

'The man was a lunatic!' Evjen suddenly exclaimed. 'The wonder is he didn't drop dead after a shot of dope like that.' For the five stolen tubes of morphia had been found empty in Schuttringer's cabin. The hypodermic syringe had vanished. Presumably before jumping overboard he had swallowed the contents of all five tubes.

Evjen asked the Inspector :

'What will you do about his sister?'

'That's a bit of a problem. I'll telegraph to headquarters for instructions. You see, there are really two distinct crimes: the one at Paris, which concerns the French police, and the murder of Sternberg, which, as it took place on a Norwegian ship within the three-mile limit, is our affair. Actually there isn't much to prove that Katia had a hand in either crime.'

Petersen said nothing, but went on eating with an appetite that amazed the steward.

The rest of the day was uneventful. Evjen went back to his usual place in the smoke-room, spread out his business papers on the table and settled down to work.

When the Captain looked in for a moment he said :

'Naturally we expect you to dine at our place as usual.'

My wife will be delighted. ... Do you know, that Inspector's a smarter man than I imagined. He's discovered another four thousand crowns in one of Krull's boots. So Krull only admitted to the fifth part of what he'd taken!

There was some movement, however, on the ship, especially between three o'clock in the afternoon and seven, during which period Jennings, who had at last got over his sea-sickness, was sleeping profoundly.

Vriens spent most of the time in Katia's cabin, but now and again he went out and knocked at the Captain's door.

In the course of his third visit the Captain said :

'I take it you're withdrawing your resignation?'

The young man's answer was a quick, shy nod.

'In that case,' the Captain went on, 'I can give you an advance on your first three months' pay. Let's see now. At four hundred crowns a month it would come to twelve hundred crowns.'

'But ... but that's the full amount, sir!'

'That's all right! Off you go!'

At six Petersen rang for the steward.

'What's the Inspector up to?'

'Still asleep, sir. He told me to call him when we're in sight of Hammerfest. Perhaps I'd better ...'

'Bring me my dinner first. Here, in my cabin. Don't disturb Mr Jennings. He won't be needed till we're alongside.'

Again darkness had fallen on the sea; but now there was only a very slight swell. The *Polarlys* brought up alongside so gently that she wouldn't have crushed an egg.

No sooner were the mooring-ropes made fast to the bollards than Petersen, after a glance down the corridor, en-

tered his cabin and started eating, if not with a hearty appetite, with unwonted assiduity.

And he asked for wine – a thing he never did in the ordinary way – which obliged the steward to waste a good quarter of an hour hunting for the key of the wine-locker. At last, oddly enough, the key turned out to be in the pocket of the Captain, who was duly contrite.

‘Haven’t you any dessert?’

The dockers were unloading and stowing new cargo in the holds.

Finally Petersen took his watch from his pocket.

‘By the way, didn’t Mr Jennings ask you to wake him?’

‘Yes, sir. I’d better do so now.’

Of the town nothing could be seen except a few houses half buried in snow.

The Captain was lingering over his meal. The cabin door was ajar and he had a glimpse of Vriens coming down from the deck. A gust of icy air accompanied him.

At the same moment Jennings appeared, blear-eyed, still half asleep.

‘I was all in,’ he sighed. ‘I could easily have slept the clock round. Where are we?’

‘Hammerfest.’

‘Been here long?’

‘Twenty minutes or so.’

‘Anybody gone on shore?’

‘I haven’t an idea. I was so hungry that I ordered my dinner right away.’

The Inspector went out and stayed away for a few minutes. When he came back he said :

‘Do you know, I can’t find that girl Katia anywhere?’

‘Really?’

'I'm rather worried about her. She's quite capable of having jumped overboard like her brother. I'd better send a wire to Stavanger.'

Was it ten, or eleven? When one is on the bridge with the temperature several degrees below zero one loses track of the time.

There were three of them with their backs to the wheel-house bulkhead: Petersen in the middle; on his right the pilot, elephantine in his thick fur coat; and Vriens on his left, rigid as a figure hewn in stone.

Was it accidental? Anyhow, it so happened that, as the ship gave an exceptionally heavy lurch, the young man's hand came in contact with the Captain's and, after a moment's hesitation, gripped it affectionately.

'Did she get away all right?' Petersen muttered across his heavy woollen muffler.

'Yes, she had luck. She found a Lapp with a sledge and a couple of reindeer willing to take her. ... But she has all those mountain ranges to cross.' There was a note of deep anxiety and pent-up yearning in his voice.

'She didn't try to persuade you ...?' Petersen began.

'She forbade me to come with her.'

There was a silence lasting – was it a quarter of an hour or a full hour? Time ceased to exist, as they strained their eyes, trying to pick up the lights. Then someone pointed.

'Honningsvaag.'

The first port of the Arctic Ocean.

The pilot turned into the wheelhouse to light his pipe. Vriens started talking impulsively.

'You know, she told me everything. They had no money

left. They didn't dare to telegraph to their father, who lives in Berlin. So they had to stop at Brussels, where they have a friend. At Hamburg they tried a dozen people for a loan, without success. As a forlorn hope Silbermann called on his uncle and told him some sort of story. That's what did for him. Sternberg got the Paris papers shortly after. He has a little daughter whom Katia – or, rather, Else (that's her real name) – was awfully fond of.

The dynamos had been repaired, and the navigation lights glowed green and red on either side. They could see the tiny flame of the pilot's match, his fur cap, his bowed head.

'Else Silbermann,' Vriens repeated dreamily. Then added in an undertone: 'Her mother's people live near Archangel. She hopes to ...' He paused, drew from his pocket a gold cigarette-case that Petersen recognized. 'With nine hundred crowns she may manage. ... Of course they may be dead, or, if they're still alive, they mayn't even know of her existence. Her father married again. His present wife's an actress.'

Shoulder to shoulder, they were leaning back against the glossy, ice-cold bulkhead. The pilot strode heavily towards them.

'What about the siren?'

It was the Captain who reached towards the lanyard and blew three blasts to announce their landfall. Already, in Honningsvaag harbour, sledges laden with codfish were being pushed towards the jetty.

Vriens's face showed in profile against the green glow of the starboard light. His under-lip was quivering.

Then at last Petersen gathered together into a coherent whole the various pictures floating in his mind: lithe, silk-clad limbs he had glimpsed on the first night of the voyage,

black garters flaunting the whiteness of the skin above; the enlarged photograph of his wife hanging on his cabin wall, and the little snapshot of his children dressed in white; the training-ship group, white-gloved cadets aligned on deck, the youngsters perched in the rigging; Vriens senior in a white drill suit seated at a Louis XVI table.

'Not in our line, my boy!' he muttered.

But there was another group of pictures hovering in the background of his mind, which were less easy to evoke: the shambles in Sternberg's cabin, Schuttringer at his physical drill on deck, stealing the tubes of morphia, and brought to bay at last, wild-eyed, hag-ridden by his fears; then in a rush of panic flinging himself into the sea.

And, finally, that queer fellow Krull, who'd once had a home in the West End of Berlin and now was shovelling coal down in the stokehold.

'Well, Vriens – you're a *man* now!'

But when he saw the wan smile Vriens conjured up, he looked away. The young man's eyes were turned towards the mountains and the snowy wastes, over which, a dark speck in the white immensity, the reindeer sledge was speeding eastwards, towards Finland, towards Russia.

TROPIC MOON



CHAPTER I

Death of a Black Boy

TRY as he might, he could not account for it, this feeling of depression and foreboding that had taken possession of him. Nothing untoward had occurred; no danger that he knew of threatened him. He told himself he was a fool to give way to his nerves like this – here in the midst of a particularly festive evening at the hotel.

'Foreboding' perhaps was too strong a word; it was little more than a vague unrest or a mild attack of the blues, and he fell to wondering when it had first come over him.

Certainly not when he was leaving Europe. On the contrary, Joseph Timar had set forth for Africa full of courage and enthusiasm.

Was it when he had come ashore at Libreville and made his first contact with the Gabun Province of French Equatorial Africa?

The steamer had anchored some miles out, and all that could be seen of the coast was a streak of dazzling white sand topped by a dark fringe of forest. There had been a heavy swell, and Timar had stood for some time on the bottom rung of the Jacob's ladder, with the sea immediately underfoot, waiting for a chance to jump into the surf-boat. No sooner had it wriggled up alongside than a wave carried it away again.

At last a bare black arm flashed out, gripped him by the

waist and whisked him into the boat. A moment later they had shot away, he and the Negro boatman, and were bouncing over the white-caps towards the shore. After a quarter of an hour – perhaps more; he could hear the steamer whistling to announce her departure – they had come alongside a jetty made of concrete blocks piled anyhow one upon the other.

Not a soul in sight. No one was there to meet him. Stranded with his kit on the deserted quay, Timar had wondered what on earth he was to do.

But it was not then that his depression had begun. He had risen to the occasion: hailed a passing lorry that took him and his belongings to Libreville's only hotel, the *Central*.

How thrilling it had been, this first taste of the tropics, the real thing, an outpost of France placed exactly on the line of the Equator! The restaurant, whose walls were hung with African masks, was just as it should be, and as he cranked up a gramophone with a big old-fashioned horn, and the boy handed him his first peg of whisky, Timar felt quite the seasoned 'coaster.'

The main incident of that day had been more humorous than tragic. Just the sort of thing one would expect in French Equatorial. And anything that had a touch of local colour enchanted Timar.

His uncle, a man of means and influence, had got him his job with the Sacova Trading Company. One of the managers at the head office in France had told him he would be posted in the bush, some distance inland from Libreville. His duties would consist in felling timber and selling cheap goods to the natives.

No sooner had Timar landed than he made his way to a

tumbledown warehouse bearing the name *Sacova* over the entrance. He hastened forward towards a bored, dyspeptic-looking European, who merely gazed blankly at Timar's outstretched hand.

Timar refused to be rebuffed and said amiably :

'The Agent, I presume. Delighted to meet you. I'm your new assistant.'

'Assistant? I don't need assistance. What the hell do you think you're going to do here?'

But Timar hadn't turned a hair. It was the Agent who looked most nonplussed, goggling his eyes behind glasses that made them appear enormous. After a while he became actually polite. Adopted an almost 'confidential' tone.

The same old story! he lamented. Those fellows in the Paris office trying to run the show overseas and mucking things up as usual! This job they'd given Timar, for instance. Ten days' journey by boat up the river. Well, for one thing the launch was stove in and couldn't be repaired in less than a month. Also the trading station was at present in the hands of an old loonie who'd sworn he'd let daylight into anyone sent there to relieve him.

'Make your own arrangements,' he concluded. 'I wash my hands of it!'

The interview had taken place four days ago, and during those first four days of Africa Timar had come to know Libreville better than La Rochelle, his birthplace. It consisted of a long red-laterite road, the 'Strand', along the foreshore, fringed by coconut palms; an open-air native bazaar; a go-down every hundred yards. Farther on, outside the native town, were a number of red-brick houses in big shady compounds, occupied by European traders and officials.

He had inspected the launch with the damaged hull. No one was at work on it. No one had received orders to repair it. As a new-comer, almost an intruder, he hadn't ventured to take any steps himself.

He was twenty-four years old. His conventional good manners made everybody, even the table-boys waiting on him in the restaurant, smile.

Was there, then, no reason for his feeling so depressed? There was. Only too well he knew it, and if he had toyed with all sorts of spurious reasons, it had been to put off the moment of admitting to himself the true one.

The reason was here, everywhere around him, at the hotel. It was the hotel itself. It was ...

Yet at first sight he had been delighted by the appearance of the *Central*, a yellow building set back in a compound full of exotic flowers and shrubs, some distance from the wharf, fifty yards from the palm grove.

The main room, which served as lounge and restaurant, was pleasant enough. The walls were colour-washed in cheerful shades recalling the South of France. There was an air of solid comfort about the mahogany bar-counter with its bright brass fittings and tall stools.

Here it was that the unmarried Europeans at the station took their meals. Each had his own table, a private napkin-ring.

The bedrooms above were seldom or never occupied. Bare, sparsely furnished rooms, distempered like the restaurant in pastel tones, with an old jug, a cracked basin, sometimes an empty trunk derelict on the floor.

On both the floors alike tall venetian blinds broke the glare, with the result that the whole place was dappled with clean-cut stripes of light and shade.

Timar's luggage was such as a young middle-class Frenchman would normally possess, and it looked sadly out of keeping with its new surroundings. He himself felt no less lost, to start with. He wasn't used to washing in a basin little larger than a soup plate, and still less used, for other needs, to have to go outside and squat behind a bush.

Nor was he used to sharing his room with swarms of noxious insects: gaudily coloured flies, nimble scorpions, shaggy spiders.

It was in his bedroom that he had had his first attack of what, for want of a better name, he had called 'the blues' – dark imaginings that fastened on him with the pertinacity of a swarm of angry bees. After he had gone to bed and put out his candle he still saw glimmering round him the white cage of his mosquito-net. Beyond that flimsy barrier lay an outer darkness teeming with tiny life, of which he was acutely conscious, and from it came small, disconcerting sounds, shrill dronings, furtive rustlings. Now and again something would settle on the net – was it a scorpion or a spider, or only a mosquito?

Lying well in the middle of the bed, he tried to follow up the various sounds, trace each to its source, locate the sudden silences.

Abruptly he jerked himself up into a sitting position. To his surprise, sunlight was entering between the slats of the venetians. The door was open and the proprietress of the hotel, placid and smiling, was gazing down at him.

He suddenly became aware that he had nothing on. White and wet with perspiration, his naked chest and shoulders emerged from the rumpled sheets. Why was he naked? He struggled to remember.

Yes, that was it. In the course of the night he had woken

up feeling terribly hot, drenched in sweat. He had an idea that the bed was crawling with small, invisible insects. Somewhere about midnight that had been. He had tried in vain to find his matches. Then he had flung off his pyjamas. With the result that his rather scraggy chest and shoulders were in full view of the woman beside his bed.

With a calmness that amazed him she closed the door, then asked :

‘Had a good night?’

She picked up Timar’s trousers, which were lying on the floor, shook the dust out, and hung them over a chair.

He didn’t dare to move so long as she was there. He was unpleasantly conscious that the bed smelt of perspiration, there was dirty water in the basin, and the comb lying on the wash-stand had lost several of its teeth.

All the same, he didn’t want her to go. Though obviously she was laughing at him, she did it in such a charming way!

‘I came to ask what you have in the morning. Coffee? Tea? Chocolate? Your mother came to wake you in the mornings when you were at home, didn’t she?’

She was wearing a black silk dress. She had drawn aside the mosquito-net and was still laughing at him. Showing her teeth – almost as if she wanted to bite him! Because he was so different from the tough-skinned ‘coaster’, because he looked clean and had the bloom of delicately nurtured youth.

In her attitude was nothing of the wanton, nor yet motherly affection. Or a hint, at most, of both. What he sensed above all in this attractive woman in the thirties was a latent sensuality that seemed to permeate the soft, yielding body from head to foot.

Embarrassed though he was, Timar caught himself wondering if she had anything on under the black silk dress.

And at that moment he felt a sudden uprush of desire, whose urgency was actually intensified by things remotest from it: the curious light-effect produced by the venetian blinds, the stickiness of the bed, the hangover of an uneasy night, disturbed by childish panics, and fumbings in the dark.

'Hullo! You've been stung!'

Sitting on the bed, she laid a finger on his chest just beneath the left nipple, touched a tiny pink spot, and looked into his eyes.

That was how it began. After that everything had gone with a rush, chaotically, with a sort of clumsy haste. And, he felt convinced, she'd been no less taken by surprise than he. Settling her hair before the glass, she had said to him:

'Thomas will bring you your coffee.'

Thomas was the boy. For Timar he was just a nigger; he was too raw to Africa to distinguish one black from another.

Coming downstairs an hour later, he had found the proprietress seated behind the bar-counter, crocheting a scarf in a banal shade of pink. Not a trace remained of the orgies of emotion they had shared a little while before. She looked quite composed, serenely calm. Smilingly as usual, she enquired:

'What time will you have lunch?'

He didn't even know her name! His nerves were quivering, his senses aching with remembered pleasure. Clearest of all was the impression of a voluptuously yielding body, the amazing softness of her skin.

A Negro girl came in with a basket of fish. The proprietress picked out the best, without a word, and dropped some coins into the basket.

Her husband came up the cellar stairs, his head and shoulders first emerging, then the whole of his massive but enfeebled body. A flabby giant of a man, slow-moving, with a sullen mouth and sallow half-moons under his eyes.

'Ah, there you are!' he growled.

And, like the fool he was, Timar started blushing when the man addressed him.

So it had gone on during the last three days. Only she hadn't come again to his bedroom to call him. As he lay in bed he could hear her moving about in the restaurant below, giving orders to Thomas, buying foodstuffs from the native hawkers who called in.

She wore the same black silk dress at all hours, and Timar now knew she had nothing on beneath it. And this knowledge worked on his imagination, so much so that often he dared not look in her direction.

He had nothing to do outside the hotel and stayed indoors almost the whole day, taking occasional drinks, reading three-week-old newspapers, or practising strokes on the billiard-table.

Meanwhile she did her crochet-work, served customers, and chatted with them for a moment as they leant on the bar-counter. Her husband busied himself with the beer and wine cellar and straightened up the tables, occasionally asking Timar to go and sit somewhere else. In fact, he seemed to regard the young man's constant presence in the hotel as somewhat of a nuisance.

There was something unnerving, almost exasperating, about this overdose of leisure and, despite the sunlight, an

atmosphere of gloom – especially during the hottest hours, when merely to lift an arm made one start sweating.

At noon and again at dinner-time the ‘regulars’ trooped in for meals and a game of billiards. Timar hadn’t struck up acquaintance with any of them so far. They eyed him with a certain interest, without cordiality as without dislike. And, for his part, he was too shy to try to make the first move.

Then this much-advertised ‘gala night’ had come. The show was in full swing. In an hour’s time everyone would be half-seas-over – including Timar, who was drinking champagne at a table by himself.

The entertainer was a dancer called Manuelo, a female impersonator. He must have come to the hotel while Timar was in bed. The first time Timar had seen him was at eleven that morning when he’d found him pasting hand-bills on the pillars of the restaurant, announcing that Manuelo was the greatest Spanish *ballerina*.

An attractive, gracefully built little man, with a smile for everyone. He was already in the good books of the proprietress; they got on together, not as a man does with a woman but as women do between themselves.

After lunch the tables had been rearranged so as to leave enough space for Manuelo’s dances. Festoons of coloured paper had been strung round the room, the gramophone overhauled and oiled.

For hours on end Manuelo had rehearsed his dances in his bedroom, making the whole hotel vibrate with the drumming of his high-heeled shoes.

Was it because Timar resented this break in a routine to which he had got used that he felt so morose? He had actually gone out that morning, braved the midday sun,

and felt his brain sizzling under the sun-helmet. Negresses had stared at him and grinned.

The regulars' dinner had been rushed through on account of the show. Then some residents of Libreville had drifted in. Europeans Timar hadn't seen before; the women were in evening frocks, two Englishmen sported dinner jackets.

Champagne had made its appearance on all the tables. Night had fallen swiftly, and suddenly in the darkness outside hundreds of Negroes had seemed to spring to life, peering in at doors and windows.

Manuelo started dancing. He looked so like a woman that one began to wonder if he really were not one. The proprietress was at the bar. By now Timar knew her name: Adèle. Everybody called her by it. Most of the customers were free and easy in their talk with her. He, apparently, was the only one who addressed her formally as 'Madame'. Wearing the usual black dress, naked beneath the silk, she had come to his table.

'Champagne? By the way, do you mind having Piper? I've only a few bottles of Mumm left, and those Englishmen don't care for any other brand.'

That had pleased, had even touched him. Then why, a few minutes later, had that look of profound depression settled on his face?

Manuelo had performed several dances. The proprietor — everyone called him 'Eugène' and seemed on easy terms with him — had slouched off to a corner and seated himself beside the gramophone, looking glummer than ever. All the same, he had an eye on everything, kept the table-boys up to the mark.

'Don't you see, you fool? That Massa there is asking for another bottle.'

Then with an unexpected gentleness he changed the needle on the gramophone.

Seated by himself, Timar was listening to the conversations going on around him, picking up a phrase here and there. Most of what he heard baffled him completely. At the next table, for instance, there was a tall, rather boulderish young fellow who had just broached his tenth whisky – and his companions addressed him deferentially as *Monsieur le Procureur*. He looked more like a third-year student than a Public Prosecutor. A timber trader was explaining:

‘Provided you leave no scars there isn’t the least risk. I’ll tell you how to fix it. You put a wet towel on his back. Then you can lay on as hard as you like. The rattan don’t leave any mark on it.’

On the nigger’s back, presumably. ...

Had Timar got through a whole bottle already? Anyhow, the boy was bringing him another. His glass was filled again. From where he sat he had a partial view of the kitchen, and just at that moment he saw the proprietress striking Thomas with her fist. The Negro didn’t flinch; motionless, steady-eyed, he took the blows.

Sometimes the same record was played ten times over. A few couples were dancing. Most of the men had taken off their coats.

At the windows there was still the row of silent black men watching the whites enjoy themselves.

Beside the gramophone sat the proprietor, his face so set and drawn as to look positively tragic.

What was happening? Nothing much, no doubt. What a fool he’d been to drink so much champagne! All of a sudden all his rankling discontents, all his forebodings, had come back, had settled on him like a black cloud.

He wanted to say something, no matter what, to Adèle – simply to feel in contact with her. He watched her movements, trying to catch her eye. Somehow he couldn't manage it. Then a man at the next table called her. As she walked past he boldly caught a fold of her skirt and gave a little tug.

A pause. A glance. An unexpected remark.

'Why haven't you asked your boss's wife to dance with you?'

She pointed with her chin, and he saw a plump, matronly lady in pink seated beside the *Sacova* Agent. Why had Adèle said that to him – and in such a curiously jumpy way? Was she jealous? That would be too much to hope for, and in any case he hadn't even glanced at any of the other women in the room.

The usual smile on her lips, she chatted with the people at the next table. But after that she didn't go back to the cash-desk. She walked to the end of the restaurant where there was a door giving on to the compound. No one noticed her – except Timar, who, without being conscious of it, had filled himself another glass of champagne.

'What a damned fool I am! How could I hope to be the only one?'

He would have given worlds just then to hold her in his arms, to feel the soft warmth of her body pressed to his. He had never dreamt a woman's body could be so supple as hers had been at a certain moment.

How many minutes passed? Five? Or was it ten? Funereal as ever, the proprietor was winding the gramophone. Timar noticed that he had a bottle of mineral water beside him.

Adèle was still outside. Perhaps Eugène had noticed her absence, for he kept looking round the room.

Timar rose to his feet uncertainly and crossed the restaurant, surprised at feeling so light-headed. He went out by the little door, and after crossing the compound came to a gate beyond which lay open fields. Someone came running towards him, brushed against him. Adèle!

'At last!' he murmured tenderly.

'Get out of my way, you fool!'

It was pitch dark. He could hear the sound of music in the distance. The black dress vanished into the night. For some minutes he remained without moving, sick of himself, of life, of everything. ...

The clock struck three. Manuêlo had finished his dances some time ago and passed the hat round. A man again, he was drinking peppermint cordial at one of the tables and prating of his triumphs at Casablanca, Dakar, and in the Belgian Congo.

Behind the counter Adèle was filling glasses, wrinkling her forehead with the concentration she brought to the task.

The Prosecutor was lounging against the bar, between the two Englishmen. He was drunk and in a quarrelsome mood.

Most people had left. At two of the tables, however, there were still some of the timber traders; determined to make a night of it, they had ordered sandwiches and beer.

One of them shouted:

'Stop that blasted gramophone, Eugène, and come and have a drink with us.'

The man rose to his feet. His lips were twisted in a wry grimace. He stared at the untidy restaurant, paper streamers trailing on the floor, empty glasses, wine-splashed tablecloths. There was a feverish glitter in his eyes. He began

walking towards the door, then stopped suddenly, swaying a little as if a fit of dizziness had come over him. After a moment he moved on again, saying rather shakily :

'Back in a moment.'

Adèle was busy sorting out notes into packets which she fastened with rubber bands.

Limp, dejected, bored with the whole proceedings, Timar was mechanically finishing off his bottle. He had no idea what the time was or how long the proprietor was absent from the room.

When he came back he looked huger and flabbier than ever, like a half-filled balloon. Halting in the doorway he called his wife by name.

She gave him a quick glance, then went on counting the notes.

'Has the doctor gone?' he asked. 'Send for him at once.'

A sudden hush fell on the room. Then the man's voice came again :

'Where's Thomas got to? I can't find Thomas.'

Timar cast a glance round the room, so did the others. Only the two extra boys engaged for the entertainment were to be seen.

'Feeling out of sorts?' one of the timber men ventured to enquire.

Eugène glared at him vindictively, without replying.

'Shut the place up!' he ordered. 'Right away! And get the doctor to come at once, if he's not too tight. Not that he can do me any good. I've got another go of that damned blackwater, and this time I'm for it.'

Timar didn't understand, but evidently the others did, for they rose tumultuously.

'Eugène, old boy, hadn't you better ...?'

'Shut your trap! And close the bloody place!'

He stamped up the passage. A door banged. There was the clatter of a chair kicked over somewhere upstairs.

Adèle looked up. She had gone quite white. She was listening to a noise that was coming nearer, of footsteps and men's voices. A group of four or five Negroes halted at the door.

Timar could not make out what they said — a few queer guttural sounds hawked up from their gullets.

Then he heard one of the timber traders, a one-eyed man, translating.

'They've just found Thomas's body two hundred yards away. Shot dead with a revolver.'

Upstairs Eugène was thumping the floor with a stick. After a while he lost patience, opened his bedroom door and yelled down the stairs :

'Why don't you come, Adèle? Don't you know I'm dying, blast it!'

CHAPTER II

The Superintendent

WHEN Timar awoke he was tangled up in his mosquito-net, which had come loose in the night, and the room was flooded with sunlight. But here the sun shone every day; a cheerless, hostile sun.

Sitting on his bed he listened to the noises in the hotel. Several times in the course of a broken sleep he had heard people moving about, whispering together, and the sound of water being poured from a jug.

The moment the doctor came Adèle had packed him off to his room, in exactly the same manner as she had bundled the others out of the hotel.

'If I can help in any way ...' he had kept on repeating with ridiculous insistence.

'Right you are. I won't forget. Now off you go to bed!'

Had her husband died in the night as he'd predicted? Anyhow, they were sweeping out the restaurant; the life of the hotel was going on. Opening his door a cautious inch, Timar listened. Adèle was speaking.

'What, no Gruyère left? No cheese at the depot either? Open a tin of French beans. Wait! For dessert, bananas and apricots – the ones on the right-hand shelf. Got it, fat-head?'

She didn't raise her voice, she wasn't in a temper. That was how she always spoke to niggers.

When, without waiting to shave, Timar hurried down some minutes later, he found her at the cash-desk, filing check-slips. The restaurant was trim and tidy as usual. So was Adèle. Not a crease in the black silk dress, her hair in perfect order.

'What's the time?' he asked. He couldn't believe his eyes.

'Just nine.'

An incredible woman! Eugène's attack had come on at four in the morning. At that time the restaurant had been in a filthy state, everything topsy-turvy. Adèle hadn't had a wink of sleep. And now here she was, spick and span as ever; she had already drawn up the bill of fare for lunch, she'd even thought about the cheese and fruit.

All the same, he noted, she looked paler than usual. There were dark rings round her eyes that changed their

expression. Then Timar's eyes fell on the outlines of her breasts, bare under the black silk, and he looked away, blushing.

'Is your husband better?'

She looked surprised at first; then seemed to remember he was a new-comer to Africa.

'He won't last out the morning.'

'Where is he?'

She pointed upwards. He dared not enquire if the dying man was by himself, but she guessed what was in his mind.

'He's delirious, doesn't recognize anyone. ... By the by, I've a note for you here.'

She hunted for it on the counter. A small official form summoning Timar (Joseph) to attend at his earliest convenience at the police station.

A Negress entered with a basket of eggs for sale. Adèle waved her away, then turned to Timar.

'You'd better go before it gets too hot.'

'Why do you think they want me?'

'You'll find out.'

She didn't seem worried in the least. And, like her, the restaurant looked exactly as usual.

'You take the turning to the right just after the jetty, before you come to the Shipping Office. Don't forget your topee.'

Was it just imagination? He could have sworn he noticed something queer about the natives' demeanour that morning. True, there was the usual cheerful hubbub in the bazaar, the usual picturesque confusion of many-coloured *pagnes*. But now and again he noticed someone in the crowd staring darkly at him, and sometimes two or three natives would fall silent and avert their eyes as he walked by.

Though he was dripping with perspiration, Timar quickened his pace. He took a wrong turning and found himself in front of Government House. Retracing his steps, he discovered at the far end of a road that was little more than a cart-track a ramshackle building with a notice-board in front: *Central Police Station*.

The letters were daubed on in white paint and the 'c' in 'Central' was upside down. Some bare-footed native constables were seated on the verandah steps. Behind them was a darkened room from which came the click of a typewriter.

'Can I see the Superintendent?'

'Massa having chit?'

Timar fished up the summons from his pocket and waited on the verandah. After a while he was ushered into an office all the blinds of which were drawn.

'Sit down. Your name is Joseph Timar?'

As his sight got used to the semi-darkness, Timar made out a red-faced man with prominent eyes, dark pouches underneath them.

'When did you arrive in Libreville? Sit down.'

'By the last boat on Wednesday.'

'Are you by any chance related to Councillor Timar?'

'He's my uncle.'

The effect of the words was magical. The Superintendent rose, a flabby hand outstretched, and said in a quite different tone:

'Do sit down, Monsieur Timar. Is your uncle still living at Cognac? I was Inspector of Police there for five years.'

Timar felt much relieved. Not only had the dingy, forbidding aspect of the room depressed him from the moment he had entered it, but he had been irritated by the Superintendent's attitude. 'There were five hundred Europeans, all

told, at Libreville: men who led hard, often perilous, lives in the cause of what in France was styled bombastically 'colonial expansion'. And no sooner had he landed than he was hauled up before a police official and treated like a suspect!

'A very fine man, your uncle. He can be a Senator any day he chooses. But, tell me, what on earth made you come here?'

It was now the Superintendent who looked baffled, and his surprise was so obviously heartfelt that Timar felt slightly uneasy.

'I'm joining a post in the Sacova Trading Company.'

'Is the Agent leaving?'

'No, the idea was that I should take over the station up the river, but ...'

The expression on the Superintendent's face was no longer one of surprise, but of frank consternation.

'Does your uncle know this?'

'It was he who got me the job. One of the Directors is a friend of his.'

Timar was still seated. The Superintendent had risen and was prowling round him, scanning him with interest. Sometimes he crossed a ray of light, and Timar noticed that his upper lip was gashed and his face more robust and virile than it had seemed at first.

'Well, it's a damned queer idea! We'll talk about it later. Did you know the Renauds before you came here?'

'The Renauds?'

'The owners of the *Central*. ... By the way, is he dead yet?'

'I hear he won't last out the morning.'

'Is that so? I wonder now . . .?'

Suddenly Timar realized what was making him uneasy, affable though the Superintendent had become. It was the way the man was looking at him as he paced to and fro. Almost the same look as Adèle's. Astonishment mingled with curiosity, and even a hint of compassion.

'You'll have a spot of whisky, eh?'

Without waiting for an answer he shouted to one of the orderlies squatting on the verandah.

'Naturally you don't know any better than the others what exactly happened last night?'

Timar felt himself blushing. The police officer seemed to notice it, which made him blush still more. The Negro handed a bottle to the Superintendent, who poured out two whiskies, puffing and blowing as if prostrated by the heat.

'I suppose you've heard that a Negro was shot dead less than two hundred yards from the hotel? I've just been seeing the Governor. It's a nasty business, a very nasty business.'

The typewriter was still clicking away in the next room. The door was ajar, and Timar noticed that the typist was a Negress.

'Here's luck. Of course you can't understand. But in the course of the next few days you'll get the hang of things, I have no doubt. I sent for you to question you, like the others. They'll all tell me the same story – that they don't know a damned thing! Have a cigarette. No? You must come and lunch with us one day, my wife will be delighted. She comes from the North of France, but she met your uncle while we were living at Cognac.'

Timar was relaxing, even coming to appreciate the semi-darkness which at first had got on his nerves. And the whisky was helping him to feel at ease. Also the Superin-

THE SUPERINTENDENT

tendent seemed to have had enough of inspecting him and was staring at the wall. He ventured to ask a question

'These Renauds you were talking about just now, what sort of people are they?'

'Hasn't anybody told you? I'm surprised. Eugène Renaud was expelled from France fifteen years ago and forbidden to return. White-slave traffic was the charge, but I suspect there were other things as well against him. We've several fellows of that sort at Libreville.'

'And his wife?'

'She is his wife. I've seen the marriage lines. They were already married when he was at his dirty job in Paris. Oh, they're a pretty pair! ... Finish your drink.'

Timar finished it, and two, possibly three, more in quick succession. The Superintendent, who drank level, was waxing loquacious. But for an urgent telephone call summoning him to the Public Prosecutor's office, the conversation might have lasted a good while longer.

When Timar went out the sun was beating down so fiercely that after walking a hundred yards he became seriously alarmed. The back of his neck was scorching. He couldn't digest the whisky, and Renaud's sudden collapse, along with similar stories he had heard, kept running in his head.

But always his thoughts kept harking back to Adèle, who when he was only seven had already been helping Renaud to recruit young women for South America. She had come with him to French Equatorial Africa in the pioneering days when there were only log cabins along the coast. After days and days of travel in native canoes they had hacked their way through the bush and set to felling timber and rafting it to the coast. The picture Timar conjured up was a

medley of illustrations to Jules Verne stories and scraps of reality.

He was walking along the red-laterite road that skirted the bay. The palm trees stood out half against the sky and half against the leaden greyness of the sea. No waves, only the faintest ripple, like a timid smile, ruffled the sandy beach. Almost naked men with gaily coloured loin-cloths were gathered round some fishing-canoes that had just come in. Barely half a mile away, at the tip of the bay, the river began.

In the spacious times of Adèle and Eugène there had been no red roofs of warehouses and Government offices rising amongst the verdure. He pictured her wearing leggings and a bandolier; certainly not a silk dress next her skin.

He turned off into every patch of shade that was to be found, but it was as bad in the shade as in the open. The air itself was broiling; even his clothes were hot as fire. In the old days there were no brick walls, no ice for cooling drinks.

After eight years of it, Adèle and Eugène had defied the law and sailed for France with six hundred thousand francs in their pockets. They'd spent the money – 'blued it' was the Superintendent's phrase – in a few months.

How had they spent it? What sort of life had they led? In what haunts would a youngster in his teens, as Timar was then, have stood a chance of meeting them?

Anyhow, they had returned to Africa, gone back to jungle life. The man had had two attacks of blackwater fever. Adèle had nursed him back to health.

Only three years ago had they bought the *Central Hotel*.

And this was the woman Timar had held in his arms one morning, in a draggled, sweat-stained bed!

He didn't dare take off his topee to mop his brows. It was

noon, he was alone, absolutely alone, on the blazing road.

The Superintendent had told him other stories, without any show of indignation, merely grunting disapproval when, to his thinking, someone had really gone too far.

That planter, for instance, who a month previously, suspecting his cook of trying to poison him, had hung the man up by his feet over a tub of water. Now and again he paid out the rope and let the man's head down into the tub. Finally he'd forgotten, for a quarter of an hour, to haul the man up again. When he thought of doing it, the Negro was dead.

The case was under trial. The League of Nations were putting their oar in. And now another nigger had been murdered!

'This time they're for it,' the Superintendent had concluded.

'Who are?'

'The people who killed Thomas.'

'How about the other cases?'

'Oh, one generally manages to fix things up.'

What had Adèle been up to on the night of the show when she went out of doors? And why had she struck Thomas in the face a few hours before?

Timar hadn't mentioned what he had seen. He'd never breathe a word of it. But might not other people have noticed her returning from the compound?

There, he'd lost his way again! Once more he had to retrace his steps. At last he reached the hotel, where today, he observed, the tinkle of knives and forks was unaccompanied by the usual hum of conversation. Everybody looked at him as he came in. He also noticed as he went to his table that Adèle wasn't at her usual place.

A new table-boy, a youngster, brought his lunch. Someone plucked his sleeve, and looking round he saw one of the timber men, a heavily built fellow with the face and manner of a butcher, beside his chair.

'It's all over.'

'What do you mean?'

The man pointed to the ceiling.

'He died just now. By the way, what did he say to you?'

Timar stared blankly. The pace was too much for him — especially in this stifling heat. Though conscious it would sound silly to his hearer, he asked :

'Who do you mean?'

'The Superintendent, damn it! He took you first because he thought it would be easier to grill a new hand. Our turn'll come this afternoon or to-morrow.'

No one stopped eating, but all eyes were fixed on Timar, who had no idea what to say. He felt all at sea, what with thoughts of the dead man upstairs and memories of the fantastic tales the Superintendent had been telling him.

'Did you get an impression that he knows something?'

'That I couldn't say. Anyhow, I told him that I hadn't noticed anything.'

'Good for you!'

He'd gone up in their opinion; that was clear. They were looking at him more amiably. But it meant that they knew he knew something. So they, too, knew ...

Timar blushed, ate a slice of cold sausage, and was surprised to hear himself ask :

'Did he suffer much?'

An inept question, so much he realized at once; it had certainly been a horribly painful death.

'The trouble is its happening so soon after that business of

the nigger who was drowned,' remarked the one-eyed man.

So they had tumbled to that too! Everyone had tumbled to it. In short, they were all making common cause, and if they watched Timar with a certain mistrust, it was because he was an outsider, they weren't sure of him.

There was a sound of footsteps in the room above. A door opened and closed. Someone came down the stairs.

It was Adèle Renaud. There was a dead silence in the restaurant as she crossed it, went to the counter, and took the telephone off its hook.

Nothing had changed in her appearance; as usual, one could see her breasts outlined beneath the clinging silk, and, though he realized how absurd it was, Timar felt slightly shocked – as though mourning called for undergarments.

'Hullo! Yes, 25, please. Isn't Oscar in? No? What a nuisance! The moment he's back, please tell him it's over and I want him to come here with his outfit right away. The doctor won't let us keep the corpse after noon tomorrow. No, thanks; I can manage quite all right.'

After hanging up she remained for some moments in a brown study, her chin propped on her folded hands, her elbows on the counter. When she spoke, to reprimand a boy, she hardly turned her head :

'What are you up to? Why don't you clear that table beside the door?'

She opened a drawer, closed it, seemed on the point of going away but thought better of it, and resumed the same position. Someone called from one of the tables :

'Is the funeral to-morrow?'

'Yes. The doctor says it wouldn't be wise to keep him here any longer.'

'If there's anything we can do ...'

'Thanks. Everything's fixed up. The coffin will be here any minute now.'

Timar was conscious that her eyes were lingering on him, and dared not look up. Then he heard her say :

'Did you see the Superintendent, Monsieur Timar? Was he very nasty?'

'No. As a matter of fact ... Well, it seems he knows my uncle, who's a *conseiller général*, and so ...'

He caught himself up; again he had grown aware that the others were observing him with that look of rather bantering curiosity – tinged now with a shade of respect – which he always found so disconcerting. And at the same moment he saw on Adèle's lips an understanding smile, that flickered out immediately.

'I'm moving you to another bedroom. Your room's the only one where I can put the body tonight.'

She turned towards the shelf behind her, took a bottle of Calvados, filled a liqueur glass and drank it off with a slight grimace. Then in a toneless voice she asked :

'What have they done with the dead nigger?'

'The body's at the hospital. There's to be a *post-mortem* this afternoon. It seems the bullet went right through the shoulder-blades – and hasn't yet been found.'

The last words were spoken with a certain emphasis. Then the man shrugged his shoulders, and after gulping down a chunk of apricot that looked like a poached egg, added :

'There's a native policeman watching the place to prevent anyone coming to take away the bullet, if it's still there. Exactly! If it's still there. ... Who's on for a game of billiards?'

After wiping his mouth with his napkin he rose to his

feet. Noticing that no one took up the suggestion, he suddenly grew abashed and murmured :

'Well, perhaps we'd better not play billiards today. Give me a Calvados, Adèle.'

He went up to the bar and rested his elbows on it, facing Adèle, while the others finished their meal. The blood had risen to Timar's cheeks. He ate mechanically, giving a little angry toss of his head each time a big fly that had selected him for its victim tried to settle on his brow.

The heat was stifling in the restaurant. Not a breath of wind out of doors. One couldn't even hear the sound of the long ripples falling on the beach near by.

The only sounds came from the kitchen, through the open hatch; an occasional tinkle of crockery. The sub-manager of the bank, a tall young fellow whose manners rather resembled Timar's and who had his meals at the hotel, was the first to leave, after lighting a cigarette and putting on his topee.

Soon after him the others rose. Some moved across to the bar for a liqueur before going. By two at the latest nobody would be left in the restaurant except Timar and Adèle.

Timar wondered whether to stay on till then. After those unaccustomed whiskies in the morning he was feeling muzzy, his head was aching. But he couldn't screw up enough energy to go upstairs and settle down in a new room, now that his own was requisitioned for the corpse.

One of the group at the bar, liqueur glass in hand, enquired :

'Shall we see him before he's nailed up?'

'I don't expect so. Everything will be done by five.'

'Poor chap!'

The speaker was a man of about the same age as the

hotel-keeper. There were younger men who had already had two attacks. Several of those present, as Timar had learnt from the Superintendent, had made one or two fortunes, only to squander them in France in less than a year. The one-eyed man, who had a gold tooth, for instance. On one of his visits to France, when he was at Bordeaux and there was a gala night at the Opera, he had chartered all the taxis in the city just for the fun of watching the audience, men and women in evening dress, starting to walk home under a torrential downpour. Now, owing to the trade depression, he lived precariously on the takings of an ancient lorry, and doing road repairs.

A bell started ringing at one of the warehouses; half-past one. Soon there were only four persons remaining in the restaurant; then only three. Still seated at his table, Timar was staring at the floor.

The last man finished off his drink and took his topee from the hat-rack. Timar's heart was thudding. In agonized expectancy he was wondering what words would pass between himself and Adèle.

Footsteps rang receding on the tiled floor. With an effort he raised his head. He had come to a decision. Like the others, he would go to the bar and have a liqueur, even if it meant his being laid out for the rest of the day.

But just as he was rising to his feet Adèle sighed like someone with a tiresome duty to perform. There was a click as she closed the till. Then without a word, without a glance in his direction, she went out. He had a glimpse of her through the kitchen-hatch; she was giving orders to the cook in a low voice. Then she started up the staircase, and a moment later Timar heard her footsteps overhead.

CHAPTER III

Frolic in the Wild

At dinner the atmosphere was much like that at lunch — except that everyone was now aware that the corpse was no longer on a bed but nailed up in a coffin astride two chairs.

When the meal ended, some meaning glances were exchanged between the regulars. Evidently they were reminding each other of a programme fixed up between them. The man with the butcher's face acted as spokesman.

'How about closing now, Adèle?'

'Yes, I'm just going to do so.'

'And — well, I suppose there'll be the usual business to-night; sitting up beside the corpse, I mean, with candles and all that. In which case you can count on us, of course.'

The contrast was comical between the man's forbidding jowl and the expression on his face, like that of a schoolboy asking for an hour off.

'What's the point of sitting up with him? He won't run away.'

The man's eyes twinkled; it was all he could do to repress a laugh. Five minutes later all of them, Timar included, trooped out.

'How about a stroll before turning in?'

'Not a bad idea! ... Good night, Adèle. See you to-morrow.'

But these efforts to make their exodus seem casual somehow missed fire; it was more of a stampede.

There were six of them standing in the moonlight, on the road. Someone was cranking up a light lorry. Behind the

fringe of coconut palms the sea was murmurous, lit with silvery gleams; it was just such a scene as Timar had pictured in far-away France when trying to evoke a tropical nightscape.

Glancing back at the hotel, he was curiously impressed by the emptiness of the restaurant. The boy was clearing away. From the cash-desk, Adèle was giving him an order.

Timar noticed that the bank manager was with them. When the lorry moved off they were side by side. Someone heaved a sigh of relief.

'Glad it's over! I don't believe in scenes, but really Adèle goes too far the other way. It almost put me off my feed ...!'

One of the men bent towards the driver.

'Hi, you! Stop at my place. I'll get a bottle of Pernod.'

It was hard to make out faces; or rather, the moonlight distorted them out of recognition. Six dark forms lurched and bumped against each other as the lorry jolted along the ruts.

'Where are we off to?' Timar asked the man beside him in a low tone.

'Oh, to a native hut, I expect – to make a night of it.'

Timar noticed that the young man seemed different from his usual self to-night. He was very tall and slim, with a well-cut profile and sedate manners. Now, however, there was a glint of excitement, a curious shiftiness, in his gaze.

While they were waiting for the bottle of absinthe Timar exchanged some remarks with him. He learned that Bouiloux, the man who looked so much like a butcher, had never been anything of the sort, but a schoolmaster, in early life.

In the midst of a remark the banker had a sudden access of good manners. Leaning forward, he held out his hand.

'Let me introduce myself. My name's Gérard Maritain.

'And I'm Joseph Timar, of the *Sacova*.'

When the lorry started off again it turned up a road unfamiliar to Timar, and the noise of the engine made further talk impossible. The ancient vehicle gave the impression it might fall to pieces at any moment, but this did not deter the driver from taking corners at top speed. At each swerve the passengers slumped in a mass towards the side of the car.

At first some lights were to be seen beside the road; then all was darkness. Presently in the distance Timar saw the glow of a fire and a group of squat black cones around it, native huts.

'Maria's place?' someone enquired.

'Yes. That's the idea.'

From that moment Timar seemed plunged into a grotesque nightmare. It was his first night out at Libreville. In the moonlight everything looked unfamiliar, out of focus. He had no notion where he was or where he was being taken.

Shadowy forms loomed up beside the road, only to merge at once into the blackness of the jungle. The brakes squealed. Bouilloux was the first to alight. He went up to a hut which was in complete darkness and kicked the door.

'Hurry up, Maria! Up you get!'

The others, too, alighted. Timar kept beside Maritain, who was more of his own kind.

'Who's Maria?' he asked. 'A tart?'

'No, just an ordinary coloured woman. But they're only too glad, all of them, to have a visit from a white man. Libreville doesn't run to cafés, so there's nowhere else to go.'

Though night had fallen the heat was still oppressive.

No one stirred in any of the other huts. Maria's door opened, a naked Negro loomed up on the threshold and, after a perfunctory salutation, slipped away into the darkness.

Later on Timar learned that this man, who so obligingly made off when the white men visited Maria, was her husband.

A match was struck, an oil-lamp lit inside the hut.

'In you go!' shouted Bouilloux, shepherding the others through the doorway.

In the hut it was even hotter than out of doors and the air impregnated with the musty odour of Negro sweat. Timar had already had whiffs of it when niggers passed him in the street. But here it was a concentrated stench that rasped the throat.

After lighting the lamp the woman began to wrap a loin-cloth round her naked body. Bouilloux whisked it off and flung it into a corner.

'Go and fetch your sisters, both of them. Mind you bring the young 'un.'

With the possible exception of Maritain, who looked rather self-conscious, all the white men seemed perfectly at ease here. There were two decrepit deck-chairs, a table, a shabby camp-bed which still bore the imprint of two sweaty bodies.

Nevertheless, three of the men seated themselves on the squalid coverlet. Noticing that Maritain and Timar had remained standing, Bouilloux shouted :

'Sit down, boys. Make yourselves at home.'

Never yet, even at high noon, had Timar felt so hot. And it seemed to him that there was something unwholesome about this fetid heat – like the smell of sick-beds or fou

diseases. He couldn't bring himself to touch anything in the hut, even the walls. He lingered in the entrance, his eyes fixed on Maritain, who was nearer the others.

'Not so nice a piece as Adèle, eh?' Bouilloux had noticed the expression on Timar's face. 'Have a drink. It'll buck you up.'

A glass was passed from hand to hand to Timar, one of three glasses that nobody had thought of washing. Bouilloux had another in his hand. The one-eyed man had a third.

'Here's to Adèle!'

Neat absinthe. Timar gulped it down; he lacked courage to stand up against the five men watching him. But his nostrils wrinkled with disgust; no less than the raw spirit, the filthy tumbler nauseated him.

'Very sporting and all that, pretending you don't understand. But, seeing as we've all been there ...'

There would certainly have been a scene had not the door opened just at that moment. Maria came in first, a humble smile on her lips. Behind her was a Negro girl, little more than a child, who was promptly grabbed by the man nearest the entrance.

It was difficult to make out what happened after that; the tiny hut was so jammed with people wedged against each other. The women hardly spoke at all. Only a stray word now and then, or a broken phrase. Most of the time they merely grinned, with flashes of big white teeth. Maria extracted a bottle of peppermint liqueur from beneath the mattress, and when all the Pernod was drunk the men polished it off between them.

There was an awkward moment when the one-eyed man enquired:

'What are they saying in the village about Thomas's death?'

The smiles died from the black faces. All the amiability, even the peckiness, had gone and they stared sullenly at the floor. Bouilloux saved the situation by a jovial outburst:

'Damn it, what's all the fuss about? Who cares a hoot about what happened to that rotten nigger? Let's have another drink, boys. Look here! What do you say to a little jaunt in the bush, to wind up the evening?'

Once again, as during dinner, understanding glances were exchanged. From which Timu inferred some hidden meaning behind the words, a prearranged plan.

'Just a moment. Listen, Maria. Here's a hundred francs for you if you can dig up a bottle of whisky somewhere.'

Somehow she procured one in the village which seemed asleep, where there was not a sound, not a whisper, not a glimmer of light. Yet Timu had a feeling that people were listening in every hut, missing nothing of what was said.

They bundled into the lorry again, shouting and laughing.

Just as they were starting they caught sight of a Negress standing beside the trunk of a silk cotton tree.

'Ho, in!'

Whatever else was said was drowned by the roar of the starter, then of the gears and engine.

Timu preferred not to see what they were up to in the lorry. Resolutely he fixed his eyes on the tree tops scudding past, etched on moonlight. They were travelling along a sand track, changing speed at every moment.

Somebody handed him the bottle of whisky, it was half full, tepid, and the neck was slimy. He could not bring himself to drink, and kept his lips shut as he tilted up the bottle; he felt whisky trickling down his chin and chest.

'We've all been there. ...'

The words were echoing in his brain, he was fretting with impatience to confront that swine Bouilloux and demand an explanation. It was a damned lie, of course! Bouilloux or the one-eyed man, for instance – Adèle's lover! Too ridiculous for words!

His mood kept alternating between anger and despondency. At one moment he had an idea of forcing them to stop the car and getting out. But he'd no notion where he was; there was no help for it, he had to stay with them.

It seemed to him that they had covered a good fifteen miles. The car stopped where the road ended, beside a clearing near a river-bank. The noise broke out again; loud voices, drunken laughter.

'The bottle!' someone shouted. 'Don't forget the bottle.'

Timar remained standing by the lorry; no one seemed to notice that he had stayed behind. In front of him dim forms were scampering in all directions through patches of vividly green moonlight and intense darkness, and he could hear whispers, stifled exclamations, sometimes shrill, excited giggles.

A tall, shadowy form drew near. It was Maritain, who discovered Timar when he was only a yard away, and hailed him with some embarrassment.

'What? Were you here all the time? We've just been having a spot of fun, you know.'

A bulkier form could be seen zigzagging heavily across the clearing. Suddenly it swerved towards them.

'Quick! Jump into the lorry. We'll play 'em a good trick!'

It was Bouilloux. Another dim figure hurried forward. Then a group of three. Then a Negro girl.

'Ho'd on, baby! White men first.'

They climbed into the lorry. The three women waited for their turn. The engine was running.

'Off you go!'

The car plunged forward. The women started running after it, yelling, trying to scramble in.

'Hands off! Bye-bye, girls!'

They were naked, naked as creatures of the wild, sleek black bodies drenched with silvery moonbeams. They waved their arms distractedly, shrieking, imploring.

'Tread on the gas, sonny, or they'll catch us up.'

The lorry seemed to be rattling itself to bits. It bumped against a tree-stump, toppled, righted itself just in time.

The women were still in hot pursuit, but gradually falling behind. The black-and-silver forms grew smaller, dwindled into darkness; the cries grew fainter.

'Good! We've done it.'

Two or three chuckles of satisfaction; no more. Somebody said:

'By the way, who the devil was she, that fat old hag?'

Maritain, who was standing beside Timar, lowered his eyes.

Some bawdy jokes were exchanged, then gradually all relapsed into a gloomy silence.

'I've had a summons to attend at the police station tomorrow.'

'So have I.'

'How about Adèle? Look here, let's have a whip round for a wreath.'

It was hot and cold at once. Timar was 'sweating profusely, his shirt was stuck to his body. The furnace-hot air seemed to be burning up his lungs, yet at the same time the

draught caused by the motion of the car made him shiver with cold.

He had given a start when Adèle's name was pronounced. The moon was setting behind the forest; he could not see the men around him. But he had already noted the place where Bouilloux was standing.

'You mentioned Adèle's name just now. I should like you to tell me ...' His voice sounded so unnatural that he lost his nerve and couldn't go on.

'What the hell do you want me to tell you? Have a good time if you feel like it, like we did this evening. But cut out the Sunday School stuff — we've no use for it out here.'

Timar kept silent. They dropped him at the wharf. He shook hands with one man only, Maritain, who murmured rather awkwardly :

'Good night, Monsieur Timar. See you tomorrow.

At last he was alone, alone in the warm, starlit darkness. The only light at the hotel shone in an upper window. The front door was bolted, and somehow he couldn't face the idea of making a noise by knocking, partly out of deference for the dead man within, and also because, after the nervous tension of the last few hours, he was in a state bordering on panic and shaking in every limb.

He crept round to the back of the building. The sound of his footsteps appalled him; his heart missed a beat when a cat scurried across his path. He had a feeling he must be sickening for an illness, because, though he was drenched in sweat, cold shivers were running through his body. At the least movement he felt drops of sweat oozing from every pore.

The back door, too, was closed. He came back to the front of the hotel and, as he stood wondering what to do, he heard a bolt being drawn.

Placid as ever, still in the black silk dress, Adèle was gazing down at him, a candle in her hand. She held the door open just enough to let him pass, and closed it at once behind him. In the wavering candle-light the restaurant looked quite different. He tried to think of something to say. He was desperately miserable and furious with himself, with her, with everything. Never in his life had he experienced such a ferment of emotion.

‘Hadrn’t you gone to bed?’

As he eyed her morosely a sudden change of mood came over him. Was it an after-effect of the squalid scenes he had been forced to witness? Or was it not, rather, an angry protest of his secret self, an itch to take revenge on her? For in the uprush of desire that set his senses tingling there was a streak of hatred.

‘Your new room’s on the left.’

He followed her supinely as far as the foot of the staircase. He knew she would halt there, holding up the candle to light the stairs, letting him go in front.

And, as she did so, he clasped her in a rough embrace — though even now he could not have said what he proposed to do. She did not struggle. A drop of wax from the candle she was holding fell on Timar’s hand. All she did was to stiffen up, and such was her strength that, woman though she was, he was unable to draw her body towards his. And all she said was :

‘You’re drunk, my dear. Go to bed.’

He gazed at her bemusedly. He saw her pale face flickering in the candle-light; her mobile lips on which even now there seemed to hover that familiar, half-mocking, half-affectionate smile.

With awkward haste he ran up the stairs, stumbled,

started entering the wrong room, while she repeated in the same gently indulgent tone :

‘The door on the left.’

A moment later he heard her coming up, opening another door, then closing it. The last sound that he heard was two light taps, her slippers dropping one after the other on to the floor.

CHAPTER IV

The Funeral

It was in the graveyard that an immense homesickness descended on Timar, a sense of isolation like a great wave sweeping him off his feet, leaving him faint and gasping. At first he was inclined to attribute it to the strangeness of his surroundings: the feathery, golden-green palms, the surging crowd of blacks, their queer, sing-song voices.

Then he realized it was something more: the full meaning of certain words had only just struck home. ‘There’s no escape from Africa except by sea. Only one ship calls each month, and it takes three weeks to reach France.’

It was eight in the morning. They had left the *Central* at seven, before the sun was high. But it wasn’t only the sun that made one feel so hot; heat welled up from the ground, from walls, from every solid object. Even one’s own body was a source of heat.

Timar had gone to bed at four, and woke up feeling wretched. Which led him to think he’d been drunker than he’d realized the night before.

All the *habitués* of the *Central* were present, including

Maritain. As at French provincial funerals, the mourners hung about in groups around the cemetery gate. The only difference was that here everybody wore white suits and sun-helmets. Adèle, too, who was walking behind the coffin in her usual black silk dress, had a topee on.

Draped in black cloth, the lorry of the previous night's jaunt now served as hearse.

After going some way along the familiar red road, the lorry-hearse turned up a steepish track bordered by native huts. Was one of them Maria's? Timar wondered.

Hot though it was, they moved at a brisk pace, as the lorry engine seized at a low speed. Adèle walked by herself, in front. She showed no signs of distress, and now and then moved to the side of the track or cast a casual glance around; as far as her demeanour went, she might have been on a morning's shopping expedition.

The cemetery was on a hill-top, with a view across the town and bay. On the left, where a river issued from the jungle, a black-and-red cargo-boat was loading timber, and each detail of the distant scene – was it due to the clearness of the air? – stood out in bright relief.

They could see rafts coming up alongside, towed by a tiny tug, and the chug-chug of its motor-engine reached their ears. There was a jingle of chains being made fast round the logs, the hum of windlasses.

Beyond the river-mouth lay the open sea. And very far beyond – twenty days' voyage by the fastest liner – the shores of France.

Somehow Timar could not feel that he was in a real cemetery. True, there had been some attempt to conform to tradition. Two or three tombstones, a few wooden crosses. But everything else was lacking. No chapel, no wrought-iron

gates, not even a precinct wall. The nearest approach to one was a hedge of grotesquely twisted shrubs with big purple berries — which by themselves reminded one how far away was Europe. And the soil was brick-red. A hundred yards away, half hidden in the scrub, were rows of rectangular hummocks, native graves. Centering the scene was an enormous baobab tree.

Some people who had not taken part in the funeral cortege, amongst others the Governor and District Commissioner, had come by car and were smoking cigarettes as they waited for the service to begin. They took off their hats to Adèle.

The burial service had to be rushed through, for there was not a patch of shade in the cemetery. It was accompanied by the clatter of winches on the cargo-boat and thuds of falling timber. The padre looked ill at ease.

In his lifetime Renaud had been, if anything, of the Catholic persuasion. As it so happened, the local priest had just left on a pastoral tour up-country, so the Protestant minister had been asked to officiate in his place.

Four Negroes lowered the coffin into an indecorously shallow grave, then scraped the earth back over it with hoes.

The thought that one day he might be laid to rest in this slapdash fashion again brought unpleasantly home to Timar the distance he had travelled since leaving La Rochelle. No, this wasn't a real cemetery. This was not a real funeral. ... This country was not his country.

He could hardly keep his eyes open, and he had a queer pain inside. And the heat, which, creeping in under his topee, was searing the back of his neck like lambent flames, made him apprehensive.

The moment the service ended there was a general

stampede. Timar would have preferred to walk back by himself, but he saw a tall form edging its way beside him. It was Maritain, who murmured rather apologetically:

'Hope you got home all right. By the way, have you been summoned too? I hear the Governor intends to be present when the witnesses are examined by the police.'

Timar had a glimpse of the bazaar, recognized the side-street leading to the police station. His shirt was stuck tight under his armpits. His throat was parched.

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As there was no waiting-room, some chairs had been put out on the verandah. But the sun beat in so fiercely that everyone had to keep his topee on.

Black police-orderlies squatted on the wooden steps. The door of the office stood open; the Governor and Public Prosecutor were already seated in it. The typewriter was clicking away as usual in the adjoining room. Only when it halted for a moment could one hear what was being said in the Superintendent's office.

The Governor had sent for Adèle first. The timber men had exchanged glances when he did so, and grinned ironically when they caught snatches of the remarks he was addressing to her in an almost deferential tone:

'... you must excuse us ... your sad bereavement ... got to be cleared up without delay ... a most regrettable affair.'

It lasted barely five minutes. A chair scraped on the floor. Adèle came out looking quite composed, went down the steps and started off towards the hotel.

From within, the Superintendent shouted:

'Next!'

Bouilloux made a face for the benefit of the others and

went into the office. The typewriter rattling away all the time, nothing could be heard of what he said. He came out, shrugging his shoulders.

'Next!'

Timar, who was last in the row, was longing to ask an orderly for a glass of water, but couldn't summon up the courage.

'The cream of the joke,' Maritain whispered in his ear, 'is that she used to be the Governor's mistress.'

Timar made no reply and merely moved one seat up when it was the banker's turn to enter the office. He heard the tail-end of the interview :

'So you're positive no one went out of the restaurant between midnight and four in the morning? Right. Thank you.'

The Superintendent came as far as the door with Maritain and, glancing down the verandah, caught sight of Timar.

'Oh, you're there, are you? Come in, please.'

His bullet head was shining with perspiration. Timar followed him into the office, which, after the glare outside, seemed plunged in total darkness. After a moment he made out some shadowy forms, one of them seated, knees spread out, beside a little table covered with glasses.

'This, sir, is the young man, Monsieur Timar, whom I was speaking of just now.'

The Governor held out a moist hand.

'Glad to meet you. Sit down. Do you know, my wife too comes from Cognac; she used to know your uncle very well when she lived there.' He turned to a man seated beside him : 'Monsieur Timar comes of a very good family.' Then, addressing Timar again : 'Let me introduce you to

Monsieur Pollet, our Public Prosecutor. ... Can you find another glass, Superintendent?

In the dim light filtering through the venetians Timar saw the Superintendent pour out some whisky, then pick up a siphon.

'What gave you the idea of coming to these parts?' the Governor enquired. He was a burly, red-faced man in the sixties. His thick white hair and glowing cheeks gave him a certain handsomeness. He had the hearty manner often found in elderly men who exercise authority and enjoy it — though less than they enjoy the pleasures of the table and strong drinks.

'And what possessed you to join the *Sacova* of all companies? Why, they'd have been in the bankruptcy court by now if we hadn't let them down lightly over the fines imposed on them.'

'I'd no notion, sir. My uncle ...'

'By the way, is he standing for the Senate at the next election?'

'I believe so.'

'Here's good health, young man! Well, well, you must have a fine opinion of Libreville. Things had been going pretty smoothly for two years, but just lately we've had a whole crop of disagreeable incidents. There was another one last night, I'm told; a gang of drunken hooligans carried off some women and dumped them in the middle of the jungle. Which doesn't make my task any easier just now, when all the natives are up in arms about the death of Thomas.'

The Public Prosecutor was a much younger man. Timar had already seen him on the night of the show, having drinks with the two Englishmen.

'Any questions to ask him, Superintendent?'

'H'm! No, I can't think of anything. As a matter of fact, I sent for him yesterday, that's how we come to know each other. By the way, Monsieur Timar, if you're staying on at the hotel I advise you to be ... circumspect. The enquiry has brought out certain facts ...'

He seemed doubtful whether to go on. The Governor, however, evidently judged Timar worthy of being taken into their confidence, and proceeded :

'It's quite clear Thomas was killed by that woman. We've a piece of almost conclusive evidence. The shell of the bullet which killed him has been found, and it's of the exact calibre of the Renauds' revolver.' He held out his cigarette-case. 'You don't smoke? A great pity it should be her of all people, but there's no getting away from it; this time we've got to make an example. You see what I mean? We're having all her movements watched. The first slip she makes ...'

'What puzzles me,' murmured the Public Prosecutor, who so far had said nothing, 'is what on earth the boy had done to make her act like that. She's a pretty level-headed woman as a rule, and knows what she's about.'

Timar would have much preferred to be questioned like the others on official lines, standing in front of the desk. It passed his understanding why he should always be stared at as if he were a man apart, different from everybody else, and accorded special treatment. These high officials, now, seemed to be accepting him as one of themselves, taking him into their confidence.

'You can't tell us anything, I suppose? Of course, those fellows in the timber companies all hang together. None of them will say a word; that was only to be expected. At any

other time we could probably have managed to hush up the affair. Sure you didn't see anyone leave the restaurant that night?'

'No one.'

'You must come to dinner at Government House one evening. My wife will be pleased to see you. Oh, and don't forget we have a club of sorts, just opposite the jetty. Only a one-horse show, of course; still, it's better than nothing. If you feel like a rubber of bridge one evening ...'

He rose, to show the conversation was over, with the ease of one used to official interviews.

'*Au revoir*, then, Monsieur Timar. If I can help you in any way, don't hesitate to ask.'

Timar made a clumsy, rather too ceremonious bow as he went out.

The sea was as calm as a lake, and as he gazed at it there rose before his eyes a picture that had been haunting him all the morning – or, rather, not a picture but a map: the map of France. A tiny, compact fragment of the continent breasting the Atlantic. How familiar was that map with its towns, rivers and *Départements* whose boundaries he could have reproduced from memory! The Governor came from Havre, his wife from Cognac. One of the timber men came from Limoges, another from Poitiers; Bouilloux's birthplace was in Le Morvan. Almost neighbours! From his home in La Rochelle he could have reached any of theirs in a few hours. And on a shallow belt of land won from the equatorial bush these men, a handful of Frenchmen, had cast in their lot together. Boats came and went, liners and little tramps like the one he'd seen loading timber, precarious links between the jungle and the motherland. And –

grim reminder! – on the hill-top overlooking Libreville was the cemetery – no, the imitation cemetery!

Walking past the *Sacova* warehouse, Timar had a glimpse of the Agent at the counter, surrounded by a crowd of Negresses. They greeted each other with a limp wave of the hand.

And then it was not only a feeling of poignant homesickness that made his heart sink, but a sense of utter futility. Everything was futile: his presence here, his struggle to ward off the sunlight seeping in through every pore, the nauseous nightly doses of quinine. Wasted effort. It was as futile to live here as to die here – and be buried in a make-believe cemetery by half-naked niggers.

‘What gave you the idea of coming here?’ the Governor had asked.

For that matter, what had given the Governor the idea of coming here? And what about all the others, not to mention that *Sacova* Agent in an up-country station who had threatened to shoot the first man who tried to take his place?

He pictured his friends, girls and young men of his age, basking on the sands beside the harbour-mouth of far-away La Rochelle.

‘Timar? He’s got a job in Africa.’

‘Lucky devil! Wish I was in his shoes.’

That’s what they probably were saying on the tamarisk-fringed beach at this precise moment when he was dragging himself along, more dead than alive, across a scene of leaden-hued desolation.

He had spoken the truth when he said that Gaston Timar, the Member of Council and senator-to-be, was his uncle. What he had omitted to mention was that his father

was a municipal employee; that he'd had to leave the University for lack of money, and for the same reason had often been prevented from joining parties of his friends at cafés or in the Casino. ...

The launch which was to take him up-river to his post was still lying high and dry amongst some native craft. No one was at work on it; no attempt had been made to repair it.

Suddenly, so precipitately that he was startled by his own temerity, he came to a decision and put it into execution. He had noticed on the Strand a garage where not only cars but boats were being repaired. Entering, he found a European trying to start up an old car by having some natives push it.

'Can you repair the launch that's on the beach over there?'

'Who's paying? The *Sacova*?' The man gave Timar a wink that indicated: 'Nothing doing.'

'I shall pay you.'

'That's another matter. I suppose you know it'll cost you a thousand francs or so?'

Still egged on by a secret craving to play the man of action, Timar produced his wallet.

'Here's a thousand on account. But I'm in a hurry.'

'She'll be ready in three days' time. ... Have a drink?'

'No, thanks.'

So the die was cast; in three days' time Timar would be setting forth to conquer his new domain – a conquest which, if accounts were true, would be far from a walk-over!

Still the man of action, he flung open the door of the hotel with a brisk, emphatic gesture. The restaurant was empty,

bathed in the half-light of all African interiors. The tables were laid for lunch, but only Adèle was in the room, at her usual place behind the counter.

Before sitting down, Timar announced, without looking at her :

'I'm leaving in three days.'

'Yes? For Europe?'

'No. Up-country.'

To Timar's chagrin, the statement which had been so agreeable to make merely brought the usual vague smile to Adèle's lips. He retired in dudgeon to a corner and pretended to bury himself in the newspapers, which he had already read twice over. She took no notice of him, but went about her daily tasks, giving orders to the boys, putting bottles in their places, studying the cash-book.

He felt outraged and determined to shake her out of her placidity. No sooner had he started speaking than he knew he was making a *faux pas* — but it was too late to retreat.

'Did you know they've found the cartridge-case?'

'Really!'

'I mean the shell of the bullet that killed Thomas.'

'I knew what you meant.' She had her back turned to him and was arranging bottles on the shelf. 'Why should that interest me especially?'

They were talking to each other across the empty restaurant, traversed by clean-cut bands of light and shadow. Once again a rush of desire for Adèle came over Timar, and this made him feel at once humiliated and still more annoyed.

'You'd better be careful!' He didn't want actually to frighten her. All the same, he'd have liked to make her show some sign of nervousness.

'Émile!' Her only answer was to call the boy, who ran up at once. 'Put the carafes of wine on the tables.'

From now on the boy kept on moving about between them, his white coat flashing in the shafts of light as he moved from table to table.

The timber men entered in a bunch, then Maritain, then a lawyer's clerk and an English commercial traveller. There was the usual atmosphere prevailing during meals, with the addition of some stifled laughs at reminiscences of the night's exploits.

Of all present, it was Timar who had the most drawn face, the weariest eyes. ...

After the evening meal he stayed on in his corner, pretending to read. Maritain had left early. The others had settled down with the lawyer's clerk to a game of cards, and at ten they had tramped out in a body. The boy had closed doors and shutters and switched off most of the lamps. During all this time Timar had not spoken to Adèle or even glanced in her direction.

Now in the shuttered, dimly lit room she seemed nearer to him; they were drawn together by the secrecy and silence of the hour. He heard her lock the drawers of the cash-desk and wondered, did she guess his thoughts, was she looking at him? Had she looked at him now and again in the course of the evening?

He heard the boy say:

'All done, Madame.'

'Right. Go to bed.'

As the power-plant supplying the electric light might be stopping any moment she lit a candle. Timar rose and walked uncertainly towards the counter. Candle in hand, Adèle moved towards the stairs.

'Coming up?'

He followed her to the door. As she started up the stairs her dress billowed out and he had a glimpse of her bare legs. She stopped on the landing.

'Which room do I go to?' he asked in a rather shaky voice.

'Why, the old one, of course.'

The one he had been in first, to which she had come that unforgettable morning, and from which he had been evicted to make place for a corpse. She held out the candlestick; he realized that once he had taken it, it was the end. She would retire to her room and he would have to go to his. He gazed uneasily at the candlestick, which she was moving to and fro at arm's length to indicate he was to take it.

'Adèle!'

What more could he say? Like a child who whimpers without any reason, he didn't know what he wanted. All he knew was that he was feeling low-spirited, discouraged by everything – though by nothing in particular.

Adèle's face was little more than a white blur in the shadows, but he seemed to see her smile as she walked towards his room and opened the door. She let him enter first, then closed the door behind them and placed the candlestick on the wash-stand.

'What's the trouble?' she asked.

In the pale candlelight the black silk dress had gleams of rusty red; the outlines of her body showed in soft relief.

'I want ...' he began, then stopped and, as on the previous night, stretched his arms towards her till his hands were on her shoulders, but this time dared not try to draw her closer.

She did not repulse him, hardly shrank at all from his embrace.

'You see, my dear, what nonsense it was, talking of leaving in three days' time. Get into bed.'

As she spoke she was pulling off her dress. She lifted the mosquito net, tucked in the sheets, patted the pillows. Timar, who had taken off his coat, was seized by a fit of shyness.

Quite calmly she slipped into the bed and lay there waiting for him to join her. Timar's shyness passed, it was as if they had always slept together.

'Blow out the candle, dear,' she said.

CHAPTER V

The Concession

HE awoke feeling much calmer. Before he opened his eyes he had a feeling that the place beside him was empty. He laid his hand on it and smiled, while listening to the noises in the room below. The boy was sweeping it out. Adèle, he supposed, was seated behind the counter. With an effort he sat up in bed, and when he saw the window his first idea was :

'It's going to rain.'

Just like Europe. And, as in Europe, he caught himself grimacing at the thought he'd need an umbrella when he went out. The clouds hung low; a dark, unbroken pall of grey. One had a feeling there was bound to be a deluge within the next few minutes, and yet the air was throbbing with the languid warmth of an unseen sun. No, it wouldn't

rain. There was not the least chance of rain for another six months. This was Equatorial Africa. A resigned, if slightly bitter, smile hovered on his lips as he walked to the wash-stand.

He had had a restless night. Several times he had wakened and gazed through half-closed eyes at the dim form of the woman lying at his side, her head pillowed on her folded arm.

Had Adèle slept? Twice she had made Timar change his position because his breathing grew laboured when he lay on his right side. The last time he had opened his eyes it was daylight, and Adèle was near the door, looking to see if she had dropped any hairpins on the mat.

Timar plunged his face into the basin, and after drying it stared at his drawn features in the glass. Though he did his best to keep his mind off it, he was fretting over a tiresome little problem that had occurred to him in the course of the night. Though Adèle was certainly giving herself to him — in the accepted meaning of the phrase — he had an impression that she was doing so in a half-hearted way: as if she were to give him pleasure, without really enjoying it herself. But he knew too little about women to come to any conclusion.

He was practically sure she had not slept a wink, but had spent a sleepless night beside him, staring up into the darkness. What inference was to be drawn from that?

Hopeless problems! Nothing would be gained by brooding over them, and he decided to let things take their course, come what might.

As he walked downstairs he realized that the cloudiness of the sky had made the heat still more oppressive, and he was perspiring freely by the time he reached the door of the

restaurant. Adèle was at the counter, the tip of a pencil pressed to her lips. At a loss how to greet her, he held out his hand and said rather uncertainly :

‘Good morning.’

Her only answer was a flutter of her eyelashes. Then after moistening her pencil she went on with her accounts, only looking up to say :

‘Boy! Bring Monsieur Timar’s breakfast.’

Twice he noticed her looking musingly towards him, but perhaps she did not know that she was doing so.

‘Not too tired?’ he asked.

‘Tired? No, I’m quite all right, thanks.’

She closed the till, tidied up the papers lying on the counter, then walked round it and seated herself at Timar’s table. Before speaking she looked at him again; there was still a trace of indecision in her gaze.

‘Are you on very good terms with your uncle?’

She could hardly have given a more unexpected opening to the conversation. So she, too, was interested in that precious uncle of his!

‘Yes, on quite good terms. He’s my godfather and I went to say good-bye to him before I sailed.’

‘Is he left-wing or conservative?’

‘He belongs to a group which calls itself the Popular Democrats or something of that sort.’

‘I suppose you know the *Sacova*’s bankrupt, or will be one of these days?’

Timar took a sip of his coffee. What an amazing creature Adèle was! He could hardly believe this woman who weighed her words and spoke in crisp, business-like tones was the same woman with whom he had slept last night. And yet, on second thoughts, he asked himself: was she

really so very different from the Adele he had held in his arms?

It was the time when the restaurant was at its homeliest, the hour of small domestic activities, polishing and scrubbing. The noises of the bazaar drifted in, though it was four hundred yards away, and Negroes could be seen passing along the road, draped in flowing *pagnes* and carrying bottles or parcels of food wrapped up in plantain leaves upon their heads.

Looking at Adèle across the table, he was struck by her pallor. But probably she had always had that ivory smooth skin which seemed never to have been exposed to the open air. He wondered if in her youth her eyelids had already had that delicate tracery of tiny wrinkles.

Timar, as a small boy, had fallen deeply in love, and even now the thought of it brought a remembered thrill. The object of his devotion had been the village schoolmistress; in the place where he lived little boys and girls went to the same school. She, too, always wore black, and her expression had the same mixture of severity and affection, and above all the same repose – so foreign to Timar's own temperament.

Just now he was yearning to clasp Adèle's hand, gaze into her eyes, indulge in all sorts of silly, sentimental remarks, thinly veiled allusions to the previous night. But the look on her face, exactly that of his schoolmistress when correcting his exercises, overcame him and even made him blush; yet never had he felt he wanted her so much as now.

'As things are, if you go back to France you'll go with empty pockets.'

On the face of it a crude, almost offensive remark. But somehow the way she said it made it sound actually

affectionate. The crudity was redeemed by an undertone of tenderness that was her special gift, owing nothing to the choice of words or any gesture that accompanied them.

The boy was polishing the brass rail of the bar. Adèle's eyes were fixed on Timar's forehead, but she seemed to be looking right through it at something infinitely remote.

'On the other hand,' she continued, 'there's a way in which you can make a pot of money within three years.'

Once again, if anybody else had said that, he'd have found it vulgar to a degree. She rose to her feet and started pacing up and down the restaurant, speaking in a still more business-like tone. Clean-cut phrases, spaced out with equal pauses, set to the rhythm of high heels clacking on the tiles. Some would have said a vulgar voice, yet in Adèle's intonation there was something highly personal, if not unique; sometimes low and vibrant, sometimes jarring the ear with a tawdry stridence, it accorded marvellously with her smile.

What was she saying to him? It was all jumbled up in his mind with other impressions: the Negresses swinging down the road, the black sinewy limbs of the boy in cotton shorts, the thudding of a Diesel engine being tuned up somewhere near by. And there were other pictures, conjured up by what she said. When she mentioned timber-felling, he at once saw Bouilloux's face lit up by the oil-lamp in Maria's hut.

'One doesn't buy the land; the Government gives three-year concessions.'

Why as he looked at her now did he suddenly remember that glimpse he had of her some hours before, hunting for hairpins on the floor while he pretended to be asleep?

She took a bottle from the shelf, placed two liqueur glasses on the table and filled them with Calvados. Did she

come from Normandy? he wondered. It was the third time he had seen her drink the Norman apple-brandy.

'The early settlers got thirty-year concessions, sometimes even ninety-nine-year leases. Under the present regulations the properties are supposed to revert to the State on the settler's death. However ...'

She never wore stockings or underclothes, and he had rarely seen legs as white as hers. He kept his eyes fixed on them because he was conscious of Adèle's gaze intent on him, as if she were trying to weigh him up.

A native came in and put some fish on the counter.

'That's all right. I'll pay you next time.'

She drank the brandy as if it were a medicine, with a slight grimace.

'There's a man called Truffaut who's been twenty-eight years on the coast and gone completely native. Married a black woman and had ten or a dozen children by her. He wants to make a move because nowadays, thanks to motor-launches, his concession's only a day's run from Libreville.'

Their eyes met. Timar could see she was aware that he was listening inattentively, but only the faintest shadow of impatience showed on her face. She went on with what she had to say, like that schoolmistress of his youth, who, even when the children were not attending, went indefatigably through the lesson to the last line.

In fact, it was the schoolroom atmosphere again, here in the restaurant, and Timar found his thoughts wandering just as they used to do in school; felt the same restlessness and the same resignation. He fell to picturing Truffaut, a patriarchal figure like a Bible illustration, surrounded by his coffee-coloured tribe.

'With a hundred thousand francs ...'

Another picture rose before him — of himself this time, handing one thousand of the three thousand francs which were all he had to the garage-keeper, who now presumably was busy repairing the Company's launch.

'His eldest boy wants to go to Europe, to a university ...'

Adèle's hand closed on his, as if inviting him to give her a moment's, just a moment's, serious attention.

'I can supply the money. You can supply your uncle's influence. He belongs to the same party as the Colonial Minister. Your uncle can fix it up for us to have preferential treatment and ...'

When he looked up again she was moistening the tip of her pencil as she had done at the bar. Then she started writing, pronouncing the words aloud, syllable by syllable :

Sacova in bad way. Risk losing employment. Opportunity has arisen for launching enterprise with excellent prospects. Essential you see Colonial Minister and arrange special permit for transfer long-term lease registered under name Truffaut to my name. Very urgent, as others may forestall. Have found competent manager for working concession. Appeal your wonted kindness to take necessary steps. My future assured if transfer sanctioned. Much love.

Timar smiled at the concluding phrase. Did Adèle really imagine that in his father's family the menfolk sent each other their love, or that one could address his eminent uncle in such gushing terms?

All the time she was writing he had been conscious of a growing feeling of superiority. It was his turn now to smile with rather pitying condescension, for her attitude, her trick

of licking the pencil and laboriously spelling out the words aloud, implied at once a lack of education and the *milieu* from which she came.

'Is that more or less as you'd have written it?' she asked.

'Well, yes. But I might change some words here and there.'

'Change away!'

She returned to the counter and busied herself there for some minutes. When she came back Timar was re-reading the amended telegram, still hardly taking it in earnest. Indeed, he never knew at what precise moment he came to a decision, or, for that matter, if he really came to one at any moment. Anyhow, a little before noon the boy started off to the post office with a telegram, after Adèle had, quite as a matter of course, given him the money for it from the till.

'Now I've a bit of advice for you. Go and call on the Governor.'

He hadn't been out all the morning, and he jumped at this opportunity, though he had no intention of going to Government House. All the same, he changed his shirt, which was soaked through.

Bathed in bilious yellow light and sweltering in a peculiarly penetrating heat, unlooked-for on a sunless day like this, Libreville was still more depressing than usual. Timar noticed that even the black men's bodies were glistening with sweat.

Instinctively one was always expecting a clap of thunder. But none came. This nerve-racking atmosphere of a storm that never broke might easily last on for days or even weeks. And he didn't dare take off his *topee* to mop his brows.

As Timar walked past the Governor's residence, looking

in another direction, the Superintendent, who was standing at the top of the steps, called to him.

'Going to pay a call?'

'How about you?'

'Oh, I'm just leaving. Go and have a whisky with the Governor. He'll be delighted. He's talked to me about you quite a lot.'

Despite the languor in the air things moved fast, too fast for Timar's taste or comprehension. Before he knew what had happened he found himself standing in a big reception-room, much like that of any high official at La Rochelle or Nantes. If two or three leopard-skins were by way of striking an exotic note, their effect was almost nullified by the furniture, obviously hailing from big Parisian stores.

'Ah, it's you, young man.'

The Governor's wife was summoned, a middle-aged, middle-class lady of no charm, schooled to ply the teapot and dutifully listen to the men talking.

'So you come from La Rochelle. I wonder if you've met my brother-in-law; he's Keeper of Public Records for the *Département*.'

'Really? He's your brother-in-law?'

Whisky was brought. The Governor sat down, spreading out his knees. He and his wife exchanged glances. Timar guessed why the Governor was so pleased to have visitors. He was a heavy drinker, but his wife kept a tight rein on him. When someone called she had to relax it; each time he filled his ~~visitor's~~ glass, he had a pretext for replenishing his own.

'Here's the best! Tell me, what are your plans? The *Sacova's* on its last legs. Of course this is strictly between ourselves. ...'

The conversation lasted a quarter of an hour. No reference was made to the murdered Negro or the enquiry. Once again Timar became slightly fuddled before lunch, but he found this condition rather a relief; it gave a comfortable vagueness to his thoughts, blunting their rough edges.

In the restaurant he noticed people eyeing him with marked interest and put it down to the fact that it was known he'd visited the Governor. He caught snatches of what was being said at the other tables :

'So I gave him a hundred francs and a kick on the backside. He went away pleased as Punch!'

Presently Timar learned that the speaker had been alluding to their jungle jaunt. Maria's husband had turned nasty, threatened to have a letter sent to the League of Nations. They had made up the hundred francs between them, twenty francs each. Timar had been left out; they hadn't dared to ask him to contribute.

He slept till five, went downstairs feeling queer inside, and steadied himself with a couple of whiskies.

'Did the Governor say anything?'

'Nothing of interest.'

'I've sent a nigger to tell Truffaut we want to see him, to fix up the deal.'

'But we don't know yet if ...'

'That doesn't matter. If your uncle lets us down, we'll tell old Truffaut to pack off, and that's an end of it.'

Again she filled him with amazement. Could this woman with the business-like, almost masculine voice and manner be the Adèle with the soft yielding body, so exquisitely feminine, who had slept beside him?

Shortly before dinner he went out for a stroll along the Strand, and saw a man repairing the *Sacova* launch.

'You'll be able to leave in a couple of days,' the man assured him.

A murky dusk had fallen, sea and sky were a livid green. The lamps were on in the restaurant when he got back. Then came dinner. After it games of billiards, a card-party in which the lawyer's clerk, who had an enormous paunch, took part.

Maritain asked Timar :

'Do you play chess?'

'Yes, a bit. But I don't feel up to it tonight.'

'Out of sorts?'

'I don't know.'

The truth was he didn't know what to do with himself, couldn't settle down to anything. He kept on wondering what attitude to adopt towards Adèle when bedtime came. Would they go to the same room, as a matter of course, and sleep in the same bed? That would be like making a habit of it, and somehow Timar didn't relish the idea — especially when he remembered that Eugène had been sleeping his last sleep in that very bed only four days before.

Yet he fretted whenever Adèle left the room or one of the men addressed her by her Christian name.

Most of all he wanted to get an explanation from her — an explanation which he did not dare, perhaps would never dare, to ask for — concerning Thomas's death. Was it really she who had killed the boy? Though practically sure it was, he could not bring himself to feel much indignation. All he really desired to know was how and why she'd done it, and also to solve the mystery of her calmness.

The restaurant with its four electric globes, the click of billiard-balls and chatter of card-players, was just like any

French provincial café. Tinar drank two liqueurs, then, taking advantage of a moment when Adèle was pouring out a drink, walked towards the stairs.

‘Good night. I’m off to bed.’

She looked up. He had a glimpse of that disconcerting smile of hers, a smile of humorous affection. She was amused by him; she knew perfectly well what he was running away from and why he was doing so. And it did not disturb her in the least!

Contrary to his expectation, he slept soundly. When he awoke the sun was already high. Adèle in her black dress was standing at his bedside.

‘Feeling better?’

‘But how ...?’

How did she know he had been feeling out of sorts? She sat down on the edge of the bed as she had done the first time she came, when Eugène and Thomas were still alive. He stroked her dress, then drew her towards him and clasped her for a moment in his arms. Under the flimsy silk her skin was cold; she had just come from the shower-bath.

‘I must go downstairs.’

He, however, did not go down till two hours later. He had spent the time dawdling over his dressing, arranging on the shelf various small objects his mother and sister had put in his cabin-trunk – such absurd and useless articles as a thimble, a set of reels of cotton of various colours.

‘Out there you’ll have to mend your own clothes.’

There was even a box of buttons of all shapes and sizes. Evidently the two women had done the round of the haberdasheries at La Rochelle. He seemed to hear his mother saying:

‘It’s for my son who’s leaving next week for the West

Coast of Africa. He won't have any woman there to look after him, poor boy!

He went down, exchanged only a few words with Adèle as he had his breakfast, then told her he was going to see the Superintendent.

'A good idea,' she said.

No sooner had he entered the office than the inevitable glass of whisky was served him.

'Anything new at your place? Aren't they wondering why the enquiry's hanging fire?'

'No, I've not heard anything said about it.'

'Thomas's father has come in from the bush. A native clerk, who put in two years at a lawyer's office, has got hold of him. He's urging him to press the case and ask for some fantastic sum as damages. By the way, has Adèle got a new protector yet?'

'I haven't an idea.'

'Of course! A chap like you could live here twenty years without even suspecting the sort of dirty work that goes on behind the scenes at Libreville.'

Lunch. Two hours' unrefreshing sleep. A short drink. Dinner. Once again Timar went up to bed before the restaurant closed. He could not sleep. He heard the murmur of conversation below, the click of billiard-balls, the tinkle of small change in the till, then the boy closing doors and shutters. Finally Adèle's footsteps on the stairs. He hesitated, lacked the energy to rise, and spent two more sleepless hours, tossing about between the sticky sheets.

He was still asleep at ten in the morning when the door was flung open and Adèle burst in, waving a slip of paper.

'Your uncle's answer. Quick! See what he says.'

Hardly knowing what he was doing he opened the telegram. A wireless, sent from Paris :

*Transfer Truffaut concession easily arranged Stop
Advise utmost caution re partnership and source of capital
Stop Please consult notary at Libreville before signing
Stop Best wishes for your success Gaston Timar.*

Timar couldn't have said if he was pleased, vexed, or merely flustered. But he noticed a change in Adèle. Hitherto she had treated him with a certain condescension. Now there was admiration in her eyes. At last she was showing signs of frank emotion. Her gaze lingered affectionately on Timar; then of a sudden she kissed him, on each cheek in turn.

'Yes, there's no denying it, you're *somebody*.' Then, handing him his clothes, she went on eagerly: 'Old Truffaut's here. He'll take a hundred thousand, with a case or two of whisky thrown in. Hullo! You've been bitten again!'

She laid a finger on Timar's chest, just above the right nipple, as she had done on that first morning.

'You've a girl's skin ... I'll ring up the notary and make an appointment.'

She went out. It was the first time she had shown signs of animation. Timar sat up in bed, staring dully in front of him. There was a clink of glasses below. Old Truffaut was being given drinks to make him easier to cope with.

'... utmost caution re partnership.'

He cut himself when shaving, looked in vain for the shaving-block, and went downstairs with a smear of blood on his cheek. He had pictured the man he was to meet as a sort of human orang-outang, hirsute and unkempt. To his

surprise it was a dapper, white-haired little old fellow in well-ironed ducks who rose to greet him.

'I understand it's you who're ...'

Was it that Timar's nerves were out of order? Was it the little stream of blood trickling down his cheek, or, more probably, the broiling heat, still ~~more~~ trying than usual that morning? He felt queer all over — a peculiar sensation he had experienced two or three times since coming to Libreville. He had noticed it especially when walking on the red-laterite road at noon; a feeling that his topee was too thin and, if he didn't get into the shade at once, he would collapse on the spot. His vision grew blurred, everything he looked at seemed to shimmer as if he saw it through a cloud of steam.

The little old man stayed on his feet, leaning against the bar. Adèle watched the two men, a gleam of almost animal satisfaction in her eyes. Standing on a chair, the boy was winding up the wall-clock.

Timar sat down, passed his hand over his forehead, rested his elbows on the table.

'A whisky, Adèle.'

It struck him that this was the first time he had spoken to her thus in the restaurant: in the same tone and with the same assurance as the timber men or the fat lawyer's clerk.

CHAPTER VI

The Last Night at Libreville

'PLEASED?' she asked, resting her chin on her clasped hands and gazing into his eyes.

He drank off his glass of champagne before replying.

'Yes.'

'By this time tomorrow we'll be there.'

She spoke slowly, deliberately, keeping her eyes fixed on him. Timar had an uncomfortable feeling that he was being put to the test.

Rather peevisly he said :

'Well, you can't say it's my fault we're not there already.'

'Don't be unkind, Joe. I never said it was.'

He was developing a morbid readiness to take offence, and was run down physically as well as mentally. His eyes were unnaturally bright and restless, his features drawn.

'Well, young 'uns, how are you feeling?' asked the proprietor, who was dressed up for the occasion in chef's uniform.

The new owner of the *Central* was none other than Bouilloux, the municipal scavenger. The deal had been put through in haste on one of the first evenings after it became known that Adèle and Timar had taken over a concession in the bush. The men had been playing cards, cracking jokes from table to table, while Adèle was busy with her accounts. Suddenly Bouilloux had looked at her over his hand of cards.

'I say, Adèle, who's going to run this place now?'

Haven't had time to think about it yet.'

'Are you asking much for it?'

'More than you could stump up anyhow!'

They laughed. But some minutes later Bouilloux got up and went to the bar.

'We might talk it over, Adèle. I've never run a pub yet, but I wouldn't mind having a shot at it.'

Next day everything was fixed up. Bouilloux paid fifty thousand francs in cash and signed I.O.U.s for the remainder.

That had happened three weeks ago, but this was Bouilloux's first night in charge of the hotel. To celebrate it he was dispensing free champagne to all the regular patrons of the establishment. For the first time, too, since Renaud's death the gramophone had been started up, and some Europeans from the town had turned up in addition to the usual group.

Timar and Adèle had a small table to themselves; both were in silent mood. Now and then Adèle would gaze intently at the young man facing her, and the slight frown that settled on her brows betrayed her concern.

Yet, though he looked ill, he was only tired, desperately tired. Throughout this last amazing month events had moved too fast for him, and with such bewildering incoherence that he had never fully realized how much was at stake.

Hardly had he begun his stay in Libreville than he was rushed off to a lawyer's office by Adèle, who had drawn her chair up alongside his and started pointing her finger at clauses which needed changing or deletion. The concession was issued in Timar's name, but there was a deed of partnership between him and Mme Renaud, widow, who was

bringing two hundred thousand francs into the joint venture: a hundred thousand for the concession and the balance for development expenses. The deeds were properly drawn up, and Timar, who had no objections to raise, signed them one by one.

Since then there had been some minor incidents, but, above all, he had settled down into a daily routine which had become a need with him. For instance, his morning walk along the red road beside the palm groves. He always made a short halt opposite the bazaar, and another farther on at the place where the native fishing-boats came in with their catch, and finally on the jetty opposite the Governor's residence.

The heat made the walk extremely disagreeable, but Timar went through with it as if it were a duty, nor did he fail to speculate on whom he'd drop in on for a whisky. Usually it was the Police Superintendent. As he sat down he would say:

'Don't mind me. Go on with your work.'

'I've just finished. What's the latest? Have a drink?'

In the stuffy, darkened office they chatted amiably. And so it went on until the story of the concession and Timar's partnership with Adèle got about the town. And then the Superintendent's manner had changed abruptly. He showed signs of discomfort and smoked his pipe with little, fretful puffs, staring at the lines of light and shadow on the floor.

'You know the enquiry's not over yet, and we're still of the same opinion. I don't mind telling you the truth; to make out a cast-iron case we've got to find the revolver. Adèle's hidden it somewhere. But we'll lay hands on it one of these days.' The Superintendent rose and started pacing

up and down the room. 'I'm afraid you may find you've made a mistake, a very great mistake. A young man like you, with a brilliant career before him ...'

Timar had taken his line once for all. With a rather superior, faintly derisive smile, he picked up his topee, rose to his feet.

'Let's drop that subject, if you don't mind.'

He made a dignified exit, watching his step and assuming the jaunty air of someone who knows quite well what he's about – till he was out of sight of the police station.

Of course the obvious thing to do, now that he had crossed into the enemy's camp, was to break off relations with the three persons who stood for law and order: the Governor, Public Prosecutor, and Police Superintendent. But something egged him on to continue visiting them; whether a self-defensive instinct, a secret hope, or mere self-assertiveness, it was impossible to say.

At the Prosecutor's the procedure was simple enough. Timar was given three whiskies in quick succession, then his host slapped him on the back.

'You're making a mess of things, old boy. Of course it's none of my business. Still, take my tip and try to pull up before it is too late. Adèle's a juicy little bit to go to bed with, I grant you. But that's all. She's no damned good for anything else. See what I mean?'

Timar rose and walked out on to the verandah with his jauntiest air.

At the Governor's, however, he had a shock. As he waited in the vestibule he heard the Governor's voice in the study where they had so often drunk together, saying to the boy who had announced his arrival:

'Tell the gentleman I'm very busy and don't know when

'I shall find time to see him.' He did not even trouble to lower his voice.

Timar's ears were burning, but he showed no signs of his discomfiture. Indeed, even when there was no one to see, he rarely failed to wear the supercilious smile of one superior to his surroundings.

He walked back along the Strand to the hotel. The restaurant was in semi-darkness, Adèle seated behind the bar-counter, the timber men at their usual places. He went on behaving as if he were an ordinary guest at the hotel, took his meals with the others and, in public, showed no intimacy with Adèle. Like Bouilloux or the one-eyed man he would shout :

'Adèle! A Pernod, please.'

For they had taught him to drink absinthe. Other things as well, which had become a daily ritual. At noon, for instance, before going to table there was always a game of poker-dice at the bar to decide who was to pay for the round of short drinks. At night, no sooner was dinner over than everyone settled down to playing cards, and Timar played with them till the party broke up. Now and then someone, he or another, would shout :

'Adèle! Another round, the same again!'

He was even picking up 'coaster' tricks of speech. Sometimes the others exchanged glances, as who should say : 'He's making progress!'

But there were moments, too, when Timar was disgusted with himself for sitting on, hour after dreary hour, half fuddled with drink, dealing and drawing cards, in this pestilential atmosphere. At such moments he developed an extreme irritability, took offence over trifles, even at a casual glance in his direction.

It came to this: he had ceased to belong to the other camp, cut himself adrift from officialdom and respectability. But, on the other hand, he knew that even after twenty years of this sort of life he'd never feel at one with the men around him – that lawyer's clerk, for instance, who for a game of cards had a whole vocabulary of queer words that Timar had never heard before.

The doors were closed. Candle in hand, Adèle went upstairs. The lighting-plant stopped humming in the compound. Every night he had a moment's hesitation on the landing. Adèle turned and gazed into his eyes. Sometimes he merely said 'Good night.' Then she, too, said 'Good night,' handed him the candle and entered her room, without kissing him, without even shaking his hand.

But there were other nights when he said 'Come!' It was no more than a flutter of his lips, but she understood. Quietly she turned into his room, placed the candlestick on the wash-stand, drew aside the mosquito-net, tucked in the sheets; then lay down in the bed and waited.

'Feeling tired?'

'Not in the least.'

He refused to admit it. Actually he could hardly keep on his feet – though all day he had not done a stroke of work, had not exerted himself in any way whatever. He supposed his lassitude was due to a sort of general debility; its symptoms were a feeling of blankness in his head, and accesses of dark, formless fear that sometimes set him trembling as if he were in instant peril.

The worse he was feeling, the more ardently he flung himself on Adèle, and as he strained her to his breast his brain seethed with unanswerable questions. Did she love

him? What sort of love could she feel for him? Was she being unfaithful, and, if not now, what of the future? Why had she killed Thomas?

But he never questioned her. He didn't dare. He was too much afraid of what the answers might be. For he could not do without her. When taking his solitary walks along the quay, he had merely to think of her white body, naked beneath the flimsy dress, to feel a rush of hatred for every man he saw.

What troubled him most was a curious feeling of being under observation. For some time past she had been looking at him a great deal, too much for his peace of mind. Even in the darkness of his room, when he held her in his arms, he was conscious of her gaze fixed on the pale blur that was all his face could seem to her. From her seat behind the bar she watched him during meals. She watched him rattling dice or playing cards. And for all its affection it was an appraising look, the look of someone trying to size another up.

What were her real feelings towards him? What would he not have given to know!

'You shouldn't drink Pernod. It's bad for you.'

But he drank it nevertheless. Precisely because what she said was true, and he knew it.

Before the deal with Truffaut could be completed they had had to wait for certain official documents to come from Paris. These had arrived by the last boat, five days previously. Timar had refused to go to the jetty and had watched from his bedroom window the steamer that had come from France casting anchor in the bay; his eyes had followed the tender as it approached the quay.

'As the hotel is sold there's nothing to prevent our

leaving tomorrow if you feel like it,' Adèle had said. 'It's only a day's run up to the concession.'

But they had not left that day, or the next. Timar had made difficulties, invented pretexts, delayed their preparations.

Now he was raging inwardly because Adèle's eyes were fixed on him and he knew very well what she was thinking. She was thinking he was afraid to make the plunge into the unknown, clinging desperately to the comfortable futilities of his present life.

There was an element of truth in it. These surroundings which at first had seemed to him so appalling and which he had loathed with all his heart – he now was seeing them from a different angle. He had grown familiar with all their aspects, and much that had struck him as absurd or ugly now appealed to him in a curious way. That grotesque native mask, for instance, hung in the middle of a wall. There was a subtle harmony between the tones of the mask and its background, vivid white on silvery-grey distemper.

Even the glossy mahogany bar was enough to give an illusion of security; it was exactly like the bar-counters in thousands of French provincial cafés, and behind it was the same array of *apéritifs* and liqueurs.

He had come to like even his morning stroll, the sights and sounds of the bazaar, his daily halt to watch the fishermen hauling their boats up the beach.

In the restaurant there was a constant buzz of conversation round their table; now and again Adèle, without moving from her place, would answer a remark addressed to her. But all the time, her chin cupped between her hands, she kept on watching Timar as he smoked incessant cigarettes, jerking the smoke out with little irritable puffs.

'Think you'll have some timber ready for that German

tramp that's due in next month?' someone asked.

'Might have,' Adèle replied. And waved away the smoke that was drifting between her and Timar's face.

On this opening night Bouilloux was in a waggish vein; on the eighteen-inch-high cook's hat which he was wearing he sported a red, white, and blue cockade that enhanced its comical effect.

'Permit me, noble lady, to serve you another glass of our delicious nectar. By the way, what will it cost me now? While I was a poor mutt of a customer I paid you eighty francs per bottle. But now I'm the boss ...'

Everyone was laughing. Drinks were loosening Bouilloux's tongue.

'Will the noble dame sleep here tonight? With our young Adonis? Boy, conduct the Prince and Princess to the royal bedchamber.'

Timar was the only one who did not laugh. And yet his discomfort was less mental than physical; he felt as if he were being forced to breathe polluted air. His forehead was clammy with sweat. He had already noticed that he sweated much more than the others, and felt ashamed of it, as of a bodily infirmity. Often when they were in bed Adèle would rub his chest down with a towel, exclaiming :

'How hot you are!'

Not that she herself did not feel the heat, but it was not with the same intensity, and what struck Timar most was that her skin always remained pleasant to the touch.

'You'll see; once we're up there you'll get used to the climate.'

By 'up there' she meant 'in the jungle', but it wasn't jungle life that Timar was afraid of. Since coming to Libreville he had learnt that wild animals do not attack men if

they can help it, that fewer deaths are due to snake-bite than to lightning, and that the fiercest-looking savages in the bush are usually quite harmless.

There were leopards, elephants, gorillas, gazelles, and crocodiles. Almost every day someone came back from a shooting expedition with a skin or two. The insects, even the tsetse flies he saw in the town, had ceased to trouble him much – apart from a brief, purely instinctive reaction of disgust.

No, he wasn't funkng it. Only it meant leaving Libreville, the hotel, the bedroom stippled with light and shade, the red stone wharf, the palm-fringed bay, all in fact that he used to detest – including the rounds of poker-dice for drinks, the card games laced with Calvados. But all these things had coalesced into a familiar, companionable setting in which he could move at his ease, trusting only to his reflexes.

And that was a tremendous satisfaction; for he had become lazy, shamelessly inert. He had taken to shaving only twice a week; he sometimes remained seated in the same chair for hours on end, staring in front of him, his mind completely blank.

La Rochelle was dear to him, but he had left it cheerfully; watching his family waving handkerchiefs on the platform as the train drew out, he had felt only the faintest pang of regret. But somehow Libreville had got a hold on him; it hurt to wrench himself away. Even when he saw the mail-boat anchored off the coast he had had no real desire to leave – though during the next forty-eight hours he had felt exceptionally depressed.

He was disgusted with everything, himself included, and yet that feeling of disgust, like his own supineness, had be-

come something he could not forgo. That was why his anger rose when he saw Adèle gazing at him broodingly. She understood – and what she didn't understand she guessed.

Then why did she love, or pretend to love, him?

He rose to his feet.

'I'm off to bed.'

He cast his eyes over the other men, all of whom were half-seas-over. Tonight, thank goodness, there was no need to wait till closing-time. Adèle no longer ran the place. It was for Bouilloux to stop the lighting-plant, have doors and shutters closed, and go upstairs last, candle in hand.

'Good night, gentlemen,' he said.

Adèle had risen with him. And that was the first satisfactory thing of the evening; she had done it quite naturally, as a matter of course.

'*Au revoir*, everyone.'

'Look here, Adèle, it's your last night. We shan't see you again before you leave. How about a kiss all round?'

She walked from table to table, bending her cheek towards each man for a kiss. The one-eyed man, who was the drunkest of the company, started fondling her breast as he kissed her. Adèle made as if she had not noticed it.

'Coming?' She went to Timar's side.

They walked upstairs together, the noise of voices in the restaurant echoing in their ears. They were occupying the room in which Timar had spent his first night in Africa.

'You've not been looking at all well this evening. Anything wrong?'

'No. I'm quite all right, thanks.'

The usual ritual. First she drew the mosquito-net aside, then made sure there were no scorpions or small snakes in

the bed and gave the pillows a shake. Finally she slipped out of her dress, with exactly the same movements as on previous nights.

'Don't forget, we've got to be up by five.'

While taking off his tie before the mirror, Timar scanned his reflected self. The glass was tarnished and in the feeble light his face looked ghastly, almost sinister.

Suddenly he remembered Eugène, twice as robust as he, who had come downstairs on the night of the show to announce, in an almost normal voice, that he was dying of blackwater fever.

Looking round he saw Adèle's naked form. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, taking off her shoes.

'Aren't you going to undress?' she asked.

At that moment he was thinking: Eugène's dead and *she* has survived him. He did not follow up the thought. He preferred to leave things vague. Still, he could not repress a slight shudder of superstitious fear. He was going with her into the bush; he would die like Eugène, and perhaps one day, in this same room, she would be saying to another man ...

He checked himself abruptly, undressed, and started towards the bed.

'You've forgotten to put out the light.'

He went back, blew out the candle.

'What time did you say?' he asked as the mattress creaked beneath his weight.

'Five.'

'Have you set the alarm?'

He turned his back to her; his head found the familiar depression in the pillow; he felt the warmth of Adèle's body pressed to his. There was a long silence. To avoid

being the first to break it he pretended to be asleep. But his eyes were open, his senses keenly alert. He knew she had not gone to sleep, but, lying on her back, was gazing at the white glimmer of the ceiling.

The silence lasted on and on, till he was on the verge of sleep. Then he heard a voice say :

‘Good night, Joe, dear.’

He gave a slight start, but did not turn towards her. It seemed to him that the voice was not Adèle’s ordinary voice; something had changed. Three or four minutes later he felt the bed shaking; he swung himself on to his back and sat up, peering into the darkness.

‘Are you crying?’

The words were followed by a sob – as though his question had at last enabled her to give expression to her grief. Then she said in a stifled voice :

‘Lie down, dear. Come. ...’

She forced him to lie down again and took him in her arms, murmuring through her sobs :

‘Oh, why are you like that? Why are you so unkind?’

CHAPTER VII

Up River

DAY was breaking when the launch cast off. Looking back, Adèle and Timar saw, outlined against the greyness, Bouilloux’s lorry, which had conveyed them and their luggage to the jetty. Bouilloux waved to them as the launch dipped into the trough of the first wave, rose and was lost to sight again.

There was a short stretch of open sea. To enter the river-

mouth they had to meet the waves head-on. A Negro was at the wheel. He wore a tattered cap, a black cotton bathing-suit, and over it an old tweed coat, yet somehow he did not look ridiculous. With an inscrutable expression he was staring straight ahead, his hands – which were paler than the rest of his body – clenched on the wheel.

So long as Bouilloux and the lorry were in sight Adèle remained standing; then she seated herself in the stern. She was in her usual costume, except that she was wearing riding-boots to protect her legs from mosquitoes.

A dismal start. They had had to rise while it was still dark and had feverishly completed what packing remained to be done. And now, to make things worse, the launch was pitching on a choppy sea, in the bleak light of dawn.

They did not speak, or look at each other, but behaved like strangers – in spite of what had passed between them in the night; perhaps, indeed, because of it. There had been a scene which had left a painful impression on Timar's mind, though he could recall none of the details. For he had lost not only his self-control but all grip of reality, all consciousness of what was happening.

'Why are you crying?' he had asked. 'Do tell me why you're crying.'

No sooner had he spoken than something seemed to break loose in his brain and he gave way to a mood of nervous irritation. And the prospect of having to listen to explanations, which would prevent his sleeping, added to his rancour. Then Adèle had said :

'Go to sleep, dear. It's over.'

He had jumped out of bed, lit the candle and poured out a flood of angry words. He accused Adèle of misunderstanding everything. What right had *she* to be miserable?

Whereas he had every reason. He had worked himself up into a state bordering on hysteria and it had been all Adèle could do to calm him down and coax him back to bed. The conclusion had been even more grotesque; he had apologized, pleaded to be forgiven.

'That's all right,' she had said. 'Don't worry any more, but try to get a bit of sleep before it's time to start.'

He had gone to sleep aching in every limb, his head pillowed on her breast. And in the morning all seemed forgotten; there had been no demonstrations of affection between them, rather a certain coolness. ...

They were skirting the palm-fringed coast, half a mile off shore. When the last houses of Libreville were left behind and the launch swung round into the river, they were greeted by a burst of sunlight.

At last the night was ended, and ended with it all its absurd imaginings, phantoms of the darkness. After feasting his gaze on the green luxuriance of the river-banks, Timar turned to Adèle with happy, laughing eyes.

'It's really quite pretty.'

'It's even better farther on.'

He lit a cigarette, and a wave of optimism swept over him. Adèle, too, was smiling. She rose and moved to his side. They fell to watching the landscape gliding past, while the Negro at the wheel gazed steadily ahead.

Some canoes were anchored in mid-stream. They had glimpses of Negroes, motionless as the craft from which they were fishing. There was a radiant peace, a tranquil ecstasy upon the river, that seemed to call for some majestic music, a swelling anthem, to drown the stridence of a saw-mill on the bank and the thudding of the motor-engine.

Slowly, leaving long trails of ripples in her wake, the

launch forged up-stream, throbbing with the beats of the propeller. They measured their progress by the big trees studding the banks. After the first bend the sea was out of sight, and there were no more saw-mills. Only a riot of tangled foliage cataracting down to the water's edge, with queer, exotic trees upstanding in its midst: mangroves whose roots spiked up from the mud, man-high; silvery-white silk-cotton trees with triangular trunks, leafless but for a tuft of foliage at the summit. Everywhere rushes and lianas; everywhere, too, a vast, brooding silence through which the steady chug-chug of the engine drove like a ploughshare.

'Is it deep here?' Timar asked the steersman, with the naïve curiosity of a Sunday tripper on the Marne.

The man seemed unaware that the question was addressed to him, and it was Adèle who replied.

'About ninety feet, I should say. But there are places where one scrapes along the river-bed.'

'Any crocodiles?'

'One sees them occasionally.'

Only one word conveyed his mood at that moment: the word 'holiday'. Yes, he was on holiday. Even the sun seemed gayer than usual.

The first native village came in sight: four or five houses dotted along the river-side between the trees, and half a dozen canoes moored in front of them. Some naked piccanninies watched the launch go by. A woman who was bathing gave a squeal and let herself down, neck-high, into the water.

'Feeling hungry, Joe?'

'Not yet.'

He was gazing at the landscape, missing nothing, with the sight-seeing zeal of a tourist.

'Show me an okume tree.'

After a moment she pointed to the bank.

'Oh, so that's an okume. Why does it fetch so high a price?'

'Because it's the only timber suitable for plywood. It's sliced up into plies by machinery; nothing's done by hand.'

'And a mahogany tree.'

'There aren't any round here. But you'll see some farther up-river, in an hour or two.'

'How about ebony?'

'The same thing. All the valuable timber was felled long ago along the lower reaches.'

'But we have still some ebony trees, haven't we?'

The first time he'd said 'we'!

'Yes, and mahogany too. By the way, old Truffaut gave me a tip which may come in useful. The concession's full of orchids. He has passed on to me a book he had about them. Some of the rarer sorts fetch as much as fifty thousand francs in Europe, it seems. And he says he's come across some varieties like the pictures in his book.'

Why was the world so beautiful that morning? Everything was coming right. Even the landscape seemed smiling upon his prospects, and though the heat was as intense as usual, Timar was not affected by it.

They had been travelling for two hours. A moment came when the launch swung in towards the bank and grounded lightly on the sand.

Imperturbable as ever, the Negro stopped the engine and flung a mooring-rope to a woman standing on the bank, whose only garment was a tuft of dry grass hung sporran-wise below her navel. Never before had Timar seen such

breasts — so amply yet so gracefully moulded, and of such majestic opulence.

‘What are we stopping for?’ he asked.

This time the Negro deigned to answer.

‘Engine plenty hot. Let ‘im cool.’

A village of a dozen huts, a few canoes. Timar and Adèle landed, leaving the boatman and the Negress chattering and laughing beside the launch.

In the centre of a clearing was a miniature bazaar. Here also there reigned a profound calm. Five women, wizened old hags with one exception, squatted beside mats on which their scanty stock-in-trade was exposed for sale.

Here human life and all that appertained to it seemed dwarfed out of recognition by the immensity of nature. At the foot of giant trees, in the heart of the vast, luxuriant jungle, all that lay on the mats was a tiny pittance: a few handfuls of cassava, some bananas, four or five small smoked fish. The old crones were stark naked, two of them smoking pipes. Another woman was suckling a two-year-old child who now and again turned to stare at the white folk with wondering eyes.

The women took no notice of the strangers and gave no greeting. Adèle, who walked in front, glanced at the little heaps of food and stooped to peer into the huts. She picked up a banana from one of the mats, but did not offer to pay for it.

The natives showed no resentment, merely complete indifference. White folk were white folk and, being white, could do exactly as they chose.

Suddenly Adèle said:

‘Wait for me a moment.’

She walked towards the largest hut, which stood a little

apart from the others, and entered it with a decided step. Timar remained behind, looking down at the bazaar mats.

Did she know somebody here? What could she be after in that hut?

He soon got tired of contemplating the old women and their wares, and walked back to the launch. The Negro had gone on shore. Timar could see him, a dark form glimmering in a haze of broken lights where the sunbeams splintered on a tangle of lianas. He was standing with the naked black girl, very close to her, but they only touched each other with their finger-tips. They were laughing, uttering slow, deep-throated sounds that seemed meaningless, mere grunts of satisfaction.

Not to appear to be watching them, he retraced his steps. Adèle had not come back yet. He thought of going to join her in the hut, but didn't dare. At a loss what to do he took a packet of cigarettes from his pocket. Promptly a small black hand was stretched towards him and he saw a piccaninny gazing up at him pleadingly.

Ten feet away an old woman, too, put forth a suppliant hand, and when he tossed a cigarette towards her there was a general scramble. All the women gathered round, giggling and squealing, trying to push each other away. When another cigarette fell they went down on their knees and fought for it in the dust. Just then Adèle came up. When she saw the women mobbing Timar she laughed.

'Let's start,' she said.

On the way back to the launch she picked up another banana from one of the mats. Only when the engine had been started up did he think of asking:

'Where did you go?'

'Don't bother your head about that!'

'Know someone in that village?'

'I'd rather not talk about it.'

The air was getting sultrier as the launch proceeded upstream. Timar felt a sudden twinge of annoyance.

'So you refuse to tell me why you went to that hut?' he muttered sulkily.

She smiled. A coaxing, affectionate smile.

'I promise you there's nothing for you to worry about.'

Why did an incident that he thought to have forgotten come back to his mind just then? One of his earliest amours. He had been spending a few days in Paris just after leaving school. He had let a woman take him to a squalid hotel bedroom in the Rue Lepic. When they came downstairs again and were in the vestibule the woman said to him, just as Adèle had said just now :

'Wait for me a moment, please.'

She had gone into the manager's office. He had heard a murmur of voices, then she had come back to him, looking pleased.

'Let's be off.'

'Why did you go there?'

'Don't you bother about that. That's *my* affair.'

Only several years later had he understood; she'd called in at the office to collect her rake-off on the room bill.

Why had he associated in his mind that juvenile experience with the incident at the village? Really there was nothing in common. And yet, when he noticed Adèle looking more cheerful than usual, the face of that other woman, whose name he had never known, rose again before his eyes.

'Who lives in that hut? A Negro?'

'Why, of course. There aren't any Europeans in these

parts.' When she saw him frowning, she added: 'Don't look so put out, dear. I assure you there's nothing to be vexed about.'

Under the torn, grease-stained cap the Negro's eyes were set up-stream as he swung the wheel this side and that with little skilful jerks.

No doubt the mystery that Adèle was making about her visit to the native hut was not the only reason for Timar's sudden change of mood. The sun was straight overhead and the movement of the launch had ceased to give an illusion of coolness. And there was something exasperating about the unbroken sameness of the scenery on the banks.

He had breakfasted off a tin of tepid *pâté* and a slice of rancid bread. But he had already drunk two glasses of whisky-and-water.

It was the time he always needed a pick-me-up. Towards noon invariably a sinking feeling came over him and not till he had had a drink or two did he feel relatively fit.

Adèle seemed to be still in high spirits, in almost too high spirits. Timar felt there was something forced in her gaiety. Usually she didn't take such pains to be entertaining. She was simpler, more placid, as a rule.

What could she have been up to in that hut? And why now this all too obvious eagerness to please and humour him?

Timar had stretched himself full length in the well of the boat, and as he watched the tree-tops sailing past he felt the old rancour surging up again.

'Give me the bottle.'

'Oh, Joe, please ...'

'Well, what's the fuss about? Can't I have a drink if I feel thirsty?'

With a sigh she handed him the whisky bottle, only murmuring so softly that he hardly caught the words :

'Be careful, dear.'

'Careful of what? Of the Negresses I may choose to visit in their huts?'

That was unjust, and he knew it. For some time he had been catching himself talking to her in that strain, but the impulse was too strong to resist. At such moments he had an immense self-pity, saw himself as a victim with a legitimate grievance against the whole human race.

'You, anyhow, haven't any right to lecture me, considering you earned your living making people drunk!'

There was a gun beside him, ready for use if any game showed up; but, except for a few birds, there was no sign of animal life upon the banks. There were, however, swarms of flies which he had to keep on brushing off his face. Each time one settled Timar gave a start, for he knew that tsetse flies abounded along the river.

Suddenly he jerked himself up ragefully and flung off his coat, under which he wore only a short-sleeved singlet.

'Don't do that, Joe. You'll make yourself ill.'

'That's my look-out.'

He was no cooler without the coat; indeed he felt hotter. But at least he hadn't that sticky feeling of sweat congealing on his chest and under his arms. It was now a different sensation, as if he were being toasted in front of a blazing fire, and he found it almost agreeable.

'Give me the bottle.'

'Please don't drink any more ...'

'I told you to give me the bottle.'

He was all the more insistent because he knew the Negro, for all his air of stolidity, was listening to all they said, sizing

them up, himself and Adèle. Defiantly he took a long draught from the bottle, then stretched himself full length on the wooden seat running along the side of the boat, after rolling up his coat to serve as pillow.

'Do listen to me, Joe. The sun's awfully dangerous and ...'

But he refused to listen. All he wanted was to sleep. He felt so utterly exhausted that even if it meant dying where he lay he would not move; even the effort of sitting up would have been too much for him.

His thoughts grew blurred, he sank into an uneasy, vision-haunted doze. He had a curious feeling that his body had become part of the solid world and curious things were taking place within it. Was he a tree, or a mountain? Once or twice he opened his eyes and saw Adèle trying to protect his head from the glare.

Suddenly there was a hideous crash, a sort of cataclysm that jerked him off the seat on which he lay. He jumped up, his fists clenched, a red mist before his eyes.

'Can't you leave me in peace, damn it?'

The launch was listing heavily, water swirling past the gunwale at a dizzy speed. In a sort of half-dream Timar saw the Negro step over the side. It flashed into his mind that he'd been lured into a trap; they had him at their mercy. He flung himself at the Negro, crashed his fist against the man's face and sent him spinning into the river.

'Ah, that's the idea, is it? Well, you won't get away with it like that!'

The river was only two feet deep at that point. The launch had run aground in a rapid. As the Negro rose laboriously to his feet Timar fumbled for the gun that he had had beside him in the morning.

'You murderous swine! I'll teach you to play your dirty tricks on me!'

But then his foot caught up on something hard, a seat or, perhaps, the gun for which he was searching. He staggered. As he fell forward he had a fleeting glimpse of Adèle's face stricken with panic and, above all, despair. His forehead bumped on some hard object.

'You swine!' he repeated, and then everything began to swirl around him, spiralling up and up, while from the zenith masses of solid darkness came toppling down.

Even after that, however, he had spells of partial lucidity. Once when he opened his eyes he found himself seated in the belly of the launch; the Negro was propping him up while Adèle, raising his arms with difficulty, passed them through the sleeves of the cotton jacket.

Another time he saw Adèle's face bending above him. He was stretched on his back. Something damp and cool lay on his forehead; there was a hot tingling sensation in his hands, along his spine and chest.

Then he felt himself being carried, not by two people, by a whole crowd – ten, fifty, perhaps a thousand men – he'd no idea! An army of black men, their lean legs swinging to and fro, to and fro, level with his eyes.

They spoke a language he had never heard before, and Adèle spoke it too.

Behind the swinging legs were trees, myriads of trees, and then came a great darkness, pungent with the fumes of rotting leaf-mould.

CHAPTER VIII

Green Walls

WHEN he sat up in bed, it was not at Adèle, who was helping him to rise, that he looked first, but at the walls of the room. Pale green walls. So it hadn't been a dream. And if one detail was true all the rest must be true.

Timar frowned. His lips set in a hard line, his eyes grew stern. He saw himself as a just but ruthless judge.

'How many days have I been here?' He watched Adèle's face, as if hoping to catch her out.

'Four days. ... But why on earth are you glaring at me like that?' she added with a nervous laugh.

'Bring a looking-glass.'

While she was getting it he stroked his unshaven chin. He had grown much thinner. His eyes had changed out of recognition, and now, after making only a few movements, he felt quite exhausted.

'Where's Bouilloux?' He knew he was alarming her; he was conscious of the effect of his staring, fever-bright eyes – and he gloated over her dismay.

'Bouilloux? But this isn't Libreville. We're at home, in the concession.'

'Answer my question, please.'

He had plenty of other questions up his sleeve. Subtly misleading questions, the kind a lawyer uses to trip up a hostile witness. For, while he had been in bed with a temperature of 105, he had seen and heard – all sorts of things! And now he'd ascertained that the walls were really green, he knew where he stood!

It might have been the second day — anyhow, it was quite soon after their arrival — that Adèle after tidying up the room had made a wry face at the walls. Then he had heard her moving about on the ground floor, giving orders, and in the afternoon she had come back and distempered walls and ceiling in green.

She evidently had not realized that his eyes were open and he was watching her. She had called someone in to help with the ceiling.

'Well, what about Bouilloux?' He was determined to get that question answered first; then he'd another one to spring on her.

'He's not been here, Joe, I assure you.'

He let it pass for the moment, though he was positive he had heard Bouilloux's voice downstairs; had even heard him say :

'Poor little Adèle, it's just too bad!'

And then one night hadn't he seen her holding the door ajar to let the man have a peep at him?'

'What about the Greek?'

About him, anyhow, she couldn't lie. Timar had seen him not once only, but four or five times. A tall young man; sleek black hair, and a bronzed face with a curious tic; he was continually blinking his right eye.

'Constantinesco?'

Obviously. After painting the walls she had made him hold the ladder while she painted the ceiling. Timar had seen him quite clearly.

'What's he up to here?'

'He's our foreman. He used to work here before, and I've kept him on. Look here, Joe, do try to rest. You're dripping with perspiration.'

But he felt a need to speak, to ask more questions, cut her to the quick, get his own back. There had been moments which he shuddered to recall.

That night, for instance, when he had felt colder than he'd ever have dreamt it possible to feel. Though he was soaked in sweat from head to foot, his teeth were chattering, and he'd cried :

'For God's sake put some more blankets on! Light a fire!'

Adèle had answered gently :

'You've four blankets already, dear.'

'That's a lie. You want me to die of cold. Where's the doctor? Why haven't you sent for the doctor?'

Then there had come a period of hideous nightmares. Timar saw Eugène in a bed beside him, eyeing him cynically :

'You ain't used to it yet, sonny. But you'll get the hang of it in time. I'm an old hand, you see.'

Get the hang of what? What the devil did he mean? Timar flew into a rage, shouted furiously for Adèle, who was sitting at the bedside. Oh, if only he could have killed her! But he hadn't any weapon. She was laughing at him. So was Constantinesco, who tiptoed in and asked in a whisper :

'Still 105?'

Anyhow, he had decided to clear all that up right away. The fever had left him. There was nothing wrong now with his sight. Just to make sure, he blinked his eyes.

'I've had blackwater fever, haven't I?'

'Don't be so absurd, dear. Blackwater isn't a bit like that. All you had was a nasty go of dengue. Almost everybody has one when he first comes out. It's not serious!' Ah! So it wasn't even serious! 'You must have been stung by an insect on the river, and being exposed to the sun all day

made it come on with a rush. One runs a terrifying temperature, but no one ever dies of it.'

He was anxious to discover if she had changed in any way. He even leaned out of the bed to see if she was wearing her top-boots, and saw that she was.

'Why are you dressed like that?'

'I have to go to the workshed now and then to see how they're getting on.'

'What workshed?'

'Where the tools are being repaired.'

'By whom?' He gave the words a threatening intonation.

'Constantinesco. He's a skilled mechanic.'

'Who else?'

'We have two hundred native hands; they're busy putting up their huts just now.'

'"We"? Whom do you mean by "we"?''

'Why, you and I, of course, dear.'

'Ah, yes ...'

He had thought she meant herself and the Greek. He was on the verge of collapse; the sweat that covered his body was cooling down. Adèle was gazing at him, clasping his hand tightly. There was no sadness in her look, only a hint of smiling reprimand, as when one sees a child behaving in a silly way.

'Now, Joe dear, do try to sleep a bit. To-morrow you'll be able to get up. Dengue comes on with a rush, but it goes off just as quickly. So we'll have a nice quiet talk together, you and I, to-morrow – about the concession. Everything's going swimmingly.'

'Come and lie beside me.'

For a fraction of a second she hesitated; and knowing the bed smelt of illness, he felt secretly ashamed.

'Closest!'

He had half closed his eyes and, seen across his eyelashes, her face was blurred. His hand slipped to the soft curve of her leg.

'Don't, Joe! You're not well enough yet. ... Please!'

But he refused to listen. Somehow he had to assert his rights; to prove that she was his. Clammy, shivering, with loveless passion, he had his way. When he sank back exhausted, all his body aching as if he had been beaten, she rose quickly, straightened her dress, and said without a trace of ill-humour:

'Really, you're impossible, my dear! A regular spoilt child!'

He didn't hear her; all he heard now was the thudding of his heart, the pulses throbbing in his temples.

Next day, helped by Constantinesco and Adèle, he came downstairs and settled down in the big living-room. The Greek's slimness and jet-black hair gave him the look of a young man, but only at a distance; a nearer view revealed a deeply lined face; ugly, irregular features. He was deferential, not to say obsequious. Whenever he spoke he was obviously courting Timar's approval.

The house was almost empty. Most of its previous contents, nearly all the furniture, had been thrown out and burnt. All that was left of them was a large mound of charred débris in the compound. Only bare essentials had been kept: tables, chairs, a couple of bedsteads; and they had needed thorough disinfection.

Timar was installed in a comfortable sleeve-chair. The room was surrounded on three sides by a verandah, and the walls inside and outside were in plain red brick, giving it a typically colonial aspect. On one side the ground fell away

sharply towards the river, near which about a hundred and fifty blacks were putting up their huts. On the other three sides the house was ringed in by the jungle, less than fifty yards away.

'Where does Constantinesco sleep?' There was an undertone of suspicion in his voice.

'In a hut just like those native huts, behind the go-down.'

'Who does he have his meals with?'

'Oh, he has a native woman with him. They live together.'

He was conscious that Adèle was watching him, and looked away to hide the smile of satisfaction he was unable to repress.

'You see, Joe,' she said, 'it's just as I told you: we've a decent, well-built house to live in, the concession is the best in Gabun — I've been round it, so I know — and I've no trouble in getting all the labour we can want. Now you must take it easy for a few days. Constantinesco will see the work is done properly.'

'Right.'

But all the same he felt depressed. He would need more than a few days' rest to make him capable of working like the others. He watched them walking about quite unconcernedly under the blazing sun, while the mere thought of facing even the milder glare on the verandah made him shudder.

How different he was from Adèle, who seemed so thoroughly in her element here, so brisk and at ease in her black silk dress, white sun-helmet, doeskin kneec-boots! She chattered away with the Negroes in their own language, and handled them as if she'd spent her life amongst them. But he — where did he come in?

She had found some worm-eaten books amongst the things left behind by Truffaut; they included a volume of stories by de Maupassant, one of Loti's novels, a manual of chemistry.

He found the fiction almost unreadable. And yet in Europe he'd devoured those very books. Here, he wondered why any publisher had thought those pages worth the printer's ink.

When Adèle came back to the living-room she found him engrossed in the book on chemistry.

Days went by, all alike so far as Timar was concerned. Each morning he came downstairs, by himself or leaning on Adèle's arm, and settled down in the big living-room, rising now and again to take a few languid steps.

By this time everybody else was at work; at six o'clock Constantinesco had rung the bell that summoned the men to their tasks. From time to time he came into the house, a hunting-crop in his hand, and reported progress to Adèle, who never offered him a chair, and treated him in a strictly business-like manner.

'I've kept twenty men here to finish off the huts,' he would say, 'and sent the rest of them to the jungle. The tables for the house will be ready by this evening. Oh, and I've sent the hunter out to shoot a buffalo; that will keep the men in meat for a day or two.'

Timar was staggered by the amount of work that had been got through during his illness. And yet, so far as he remembered, every time he opened his eyes he had seen Adèle at his bedside. Yet somehow all the while she had been superintending everything, keeping the natives at it.

Marvellous woman! True, she looked paler, and the rings round her eyes were darker.

'We'll have to rig up a shelter for the launch, or one day when we need her we'll find the engine rusted up.'

'I've thought of that. Two men are setting up the posts just now, on the left of the group of huts.'

Then Adèle and Timar were left by themselves. But even then her hands were never idle.

'You'll see, Joe; you'll get used to it. This is one of the healthiest spots in the district. In three years' time we'll be back in France with a million francs in the bank.'

That was precisely what dismayed Timar; he hadn't the least wish to return to France. What on earth could he do there? Where would he settle down? Would he go back to his family? Would he stay with Adèle?

Somehow he had struggled through the two novels left by Truffaut, and these had proved to him how utterly unfit for civilized life he had become. He simply couldn't picture himself going to La Rochelle, or sitting talking to his friends on the terrace of the *Café de la Paix*. And as for living with Adèle in Paris or anywhere in France – that was equally unthinkable.

No, he preferred not to think about it. Better let things drift. Meanwhile he tried to adapt himself to his surroundings, to form habits, to get used to up-country life. In a few days he'd be able to go out. He'd supervise that swarm of natives on the river-bank; go into the jungle and point out the trees to be felled.

But he was still too much run down. After walking for five minutes in the room, the floor of which, like the walls, was in red brick, his head began to swim and he staggered back to his chair.

'Sure Bouilloux didn't come here while I was ill?'

'Why on earth should Bouilloux want to come here?' She turned it off with a laugh, as when he'd asked her why she entered that native hut. With the result that he was perpetually torn between confidence and mistrust – between love and hatred.

When she was not with him he grew restless, kept going to the verandah to see if he couldn't catch a glimpse of her. It was always a relief when he saw Constantinesco walking in a direction that led away from the path she had taken when leaving the house.

The third day was adventurous; though Adèle did her best to dissuade him, he went out of doors. He saw sixty black men harnessed to a huge log of okume, hauling it down on rollers to the river.

The first tree! *His* first tree! Though his legs were giving way beneath him, he prowled round the naked Negroes, their acrid odour tickling his nostrils. Behind them Constantinesco, in gumboots as usual, was shouting orders in a native dialect. The log moved forward, six inches at a time. The black bodies streamed with sweat, the men were panting.

'How much is that worth?' Tinar asked Adèle, who had just come up.

'About eight hundred francs a ton, but you have to deduct three hundred for the cost of transport. That log will bring us in about two thousand francs profit.'

It surprised him that such an enormous mass of wood was not worth more.

'And if it was mahogany?'

There was no reply. She was listening. Then he, too, caught the hum of a motor engine in the distance.

'That's a launch.'

The log had stuck half-way down the bank; some men had stepped into the river and were tugging at the ropes. The sun was low. It would be quite dark in half an hour. Constantinesco, who had twenty years' experience of Gabun, had long since taken off his topee.

Just as the log, after being stoutly tethered like a captive monster, was allowed to take the water, a motor-launch swung round the bend and grounded on the bank.

In it were two Negroes and a European who jumped on shore and shook Adèle's hand.

'Settled down already? Quick work!'

Once a month this motor-launch came up the river bringing foodstuffs and their mails to the European timber traders, calling in at the stations along the river-banks.

'You must be thirsty. Come to the house.'

The young man had a glass of whisky, then produced from the satchel he had with him a letter addressed to Timar. It had a French stamp; the address was in his sister's writing. He read the first few lines before thrusting it into his pocket.

My dear Joe,

I am writing from Royan where we are spending the day. The sun is shining, but not half so brightly, I'm sure, as in the wonderful country where you are now, you lucky chap! The Germain boys are here, too, and I'm going surf-riding with them this afternoon. ...

'Nothing for me?' asked Adèle.

'No ... wait a bit! Do you know, old Bouilloux's engine conked out on the way down and he had to sleep a night in a native village?'

Timar swung round and looked at Adèle, but she did not flinch or show the least concern.

'Really?' she murmured. But when she spoke again her sprightliness seemed forced. 'What's the latest from the gay metropolis?'

'Nothing much.'

They were sitting in the big red-brick room, sparsely furnished with three long chairs and a table. On the river-bank the Negroes who had dragged the log were mopping their brows and laughing. Constantinesco was walking towards the bell whose clang announced the start and the conclusion of the day's work.

'Except, of course, that business about Thomas,' the young man added.

He seemed disinclined to continue. He gave the impression of being an amiable, rather gauche and shy young man. For three weeks every month he travelled up and down the river in his motor-launch, in the company of the two natives, usually sleeping in a tent pitched in some jungle clearing. He had begun life as a commercial traveller in France, and since coming to Libreville had opened up a busy trade with the villages of the interior, where he sold complete *trousseaux*, on the monthly instalment plan, to dusky beauties. Hail-fellow-well-met with all and sundry, but tactless to a degree, he carried on his business in the tropics exactly as he had done in the hamlets of Normandy and Brittany.

'They've found out who killed him. Another nigger, needless to say.'

Adèle still betrayed no emotion of any kind. Her gaze shifted from Timar to the young trader.

'He was arrested two days after you left, or rather the

headman of his village made him over to the police. Since then there's been no end of palavers. The headman brought along some witnesses.'

Timar was watching the young man's face and breathing heavily.

'Well, what's come of it?' he asked.

'Oh, the nigger's acting dumb, pretends he knows damn-all about it. All the questions have to be put through an interpreter, and that holds things up no end. Still, one thing's proved all right; the revolver was found buried in his hut. And there are witnesses who say that he and Thomas were after the same girl.

'By the way, what can I let you have? I've some excellent canned lobster. If you're short of petrol, I can spare twenty cans.'

Timar had ceased listening. He was gazing at Adèle, who replied :

'Right! I'll take the petrol. And two bags of rice for our men. Have you any cigarettes? I can sell them here three francs the packet.'

'I can do you some at a franc a packet in cases of a thousand.'

Night was falling. The river was veiled in shadow. Constantinesco was starting the electric power-plant; the lamps glowed red, then yellow.

'Tell me!' Timar said. 'That man they've arrested, what village does he come from?'

'Please, Joe ...'

'Why shouldn't I ask him if I want to?'

'A little village down-stream.'

Timar got up and went out on the verandah. He could just make out the black mass of the log breasting the current

like a ship at anchor. The Negroes were kindling a fire in the middle of the ring of huts. The forest round the house was inky black but for the white, wraith-like trunk of a solitary silk-cotton tree tapering skywards.

All his senses were abnormally alert, and, though the words were whispered in the commercial traveller's ear, he distinctly heard what Adèle said :

'You blundering fool!'

CHAPTER IX

The Empty Bed

'STOP, Joe, please!' she whispered. 'He can hear everything.'

The room was in darkness but for the glimmering rectangle of an open window, divided into two unequal parts by a thin, pale line, the trunk of the silk-cotton tree.

They were lying on their backs, and Timar knew that she was staring up at the ceiling. The traveller could still be heard moving about in the adjoining room, where they had given him a shake-down for the night.

'I insist on knowing the truth.' Timar spoke harshly, without moving; he, too, was gazing up into the darkness. All he could feel of Adèle was her elbow, the smooth curve of a hip.

'Please wait till to-morrow. When we're by ourselves, I'll explain ...'

'No. You must tell me to-night.'

'Tell you what?'

'You killed Thomas. ...'

'Hush!'

She did not stir; there was not the faintest tremor of the body stretched beside him in the bed.

'Well, won't you speak? You killed him, didn't you?'

Holding his breath, he waited. Then there was a faint sound in his ear, a whispered 'Yes.'

He swung himself round, groped in the darkness, caught her roughly by the wrist.

'You killed him, and you're letting an innocent man bear the brunt. You went to that hut to ...'

'Joe dear, please! You're hurting me ... Oh!'

A cry of physical pain. He was crouching over her, belabouring her with his fists.

'Listen! I promise you that I'll explain everything, yes everything, to-morrow.'

'And supposing I don't want explanations? Supposing I never want to see you again, to hear your voice, to ...?'

He choked, his arms went limp, he was sweating as never before. And suddenly he saw red, he felt a wild desire to do something desperate – to crush her life out, to pound the wall with his bare fists. He started hammering on the wall. Adèle implored:

'Please, Joe! That man will hear. I'll tell you everything. But please stop doing that.'

His knuckles were smarting. He turned, stared blankly towards Adèle. Was he looking for some other object on which to vent his rage?

Their bodies showed as two white streaks upon the darkness. They had to strain their eyes to make out each other's faces. Adèle went up to Timar and sponged his chest with a handkerchief.

'Do go back to bed. You'll only bring the fever on again.'

She was right, he felt it coming on. And the memory of

the nightmare days he'd been through sobered him. He saw the dim shape of a chair beside him, drew it up, and seated himself.

'Speak away. I'm listening.'

He did not want to be too near her, lest he should start using violence to her again. He had resolved to keep calm; but his calmness was precarious, at the mercy of any impulse.

'Do you really want me to tell you all about it, right away?' She felt bewildered, uncertain what line to take, whether to stand or sit. Finally she sat down on the edge of the bed, about a yard from Timar.

'You didn't know Eugène. He was always jealous, especially latterly, when he knew he hadn't long to live.' She spoke in whispers, because of the man in the next room.

'So jealous as all that? And he used to shake hands with Bouilloux and the Governor and all the other men who've slept with you!'

He could not see her, but he heard her catch her breath and swallow hard. For a while the silence was so intense that they could hear, through the window, the low, incessant murmur of the forest.

Adèle blew her nose. When she spoke again her voice was firmer.

'You can't understand. It wasn't the same thing. What I felt for you was ...' She hesitated. Perhaps the word that hovered on her lips struck her as too romantic, too remote. 'It wasn't the same thing,' she repeated. 'Anyhow, Thomas saw me coming from your room. He asked for a thousand francs. He'd been wanting the money for some time, to buy a wife. I refused. On the night of the show he tackled me again and ...'

'You killed him,' Timar muttered in a pensive tone.

'He threatened to tell Eugène.'

'So really it was for my sake ...' he began.

'No,' she said quite frankly. 'I shot him because I didn't want any bother. How could I guess Eugène was going to die that night?'

Timar had to struggle to maintain the unnatural calm he had imposed on his throbbing nerves. He stared hard at the window, the spectral tree-trunk, listening to the palpitating silence of the jungle.

'Come to bed, Joe.'

'Unbelievable! Again he felt a mad impulse to cry out, batter the wall with his fists. She had confessed to murder, and now she was asking him to lie beside her – side by side with her warm, naked body!

It was so simple. She'd killed a man just to avoid bother! And now he, Timar, was making trouble for her with his questions, preventing her from enjoying the peace she'd earned. When he referred to the Governor and the rest of them as her lovers, she didn't deny it. Only it wasn't the same thing! *He* couldn't understand – unlike her husband, who, for his part, saw the difference immediately.

There were moments when he felt on the point of flinging himself on her, thrashing her within an inch of her life.

'And what about the poor devil they've arrested?'

'Would you rather I was sent to penal servitude?'

'Keep quiet. No, not another word! Leave me in peace.'

'Joe!'

'Don't speak – please!'

He went to the window and leaned against the window-frame, letting the night breeze play on his sweating body.

There were silvery gleams on the river near the floating log. For five minutes or so he stayed thus; then he heard a voice behind him :

‘Aren’t you coming to bed?’

He stayed where he was without answering. But he wasn’t thinking about Adèle all the time, still less about Thomas. All sorts of ideas kept coming to his mind. It struck him, for instance, that quite near him leopards prowled, while at this very hour in the seaside towns of France people were walking home from the casinos. Some of them, perhaps, had been to films of African life, with banana groves, a planter with a truculent moustache, love-scenes to the accompaniment of exotic music.

His thoughts strayed back to the floating log. When the rainy season came it would be rafted down the stream along with all the other logs that had been felled. Hundreds of them would be hoisted on board a red-and-black tramp steamer moored at the river-mouth. On their way down they would drift past the village with the hut that Adèle had visited.

How they had laughed, with dazzling flashes of square white teeth, the Negro boatman and that handsome girl with the big breasts, upon the river-bank !

It came to this. All his life Eugène had tolerated his wife’s having lovers, provided these were influential folk, people who might be useful to him. That, anyhow, was plain as daylight. And, after all, wasn’t that, in a way, their *métier*, hers and his?

He looked round, had an impression that Adèle’s eyes were open, and resumed his musings. He was feeling cold and sleepy. To keep himself in countenance he lit a cigarette.

What was to be done? The concession was registered in his flame; and to obtain it he had employed his uncle's influence, dragged in his family.

Out there in the jungle there were elephants roaming, so Constantinesco had informed him in the afternoon.

Had Adèle slept with Constantinesco too? ... He heard her breathing more heavily, in a more even rhythm, and took the opportunity of slipping into the bed.

Had he been mistaken? He had the impression of a slight change in her breathing now he was beside her. Perhaps she had only pretended to sleep, or else he had awakened her and she was trying to control her breath.

Their limbs were not touching, they were invisible to each other, but each was intensely conscious of the other's nearness. The least tremor of their bodies was multiplied a thousandfold.

'She doesn't understand,' he mused. 'She's guided by her instincts and the life she has led. And yet she never seemed the sort of woman who makes herself cheap with everybody. Somehow you'd never think it of her — all the men she's been with!' That was what had impressed him most, even more than the languor, the almost fluid softness of her body; that amazing sense of freshness, almost of purity, which emanated from her.

His thoughts swerved back to the forest. What did elephants do at night? Prowl about the jungle like the other, smaller animals? Or did they sleep? ... He could hear the sound of his own breathing, and it was like a sleeper's; perhaps he was dozing off at last. Adèle's hand crept towards him, and settled on his chest just above his heart.

He did not move or give any sign of not being quite

asleep. He knew no more till the jangle of the bell roused him abruptly, and sunbeams were fretting his eyelids. '

He opened his eyes. He heard the men padding across the sand towards the forest. He ran his hand over the place beside him. The sheets were stone-cold; Adèle had evidently been up some time.

Before rising he stayed a quarter of an hour gazing up at the ceiling, and was amazed at his peace of mind, the tranquillity of a physically exhausted man or a convalescent who has burnt up all his energy in a serious illness. His knuckles were still sore; the skin over the joints was cracked.

At last he rose, struggled into a shirt and trousers, brushed his hair. In the living-room he found the commercial traveller reading an old newspaper while he breakfasted by himself.

'Slept well?'

Timar was looking out for Adèle, but he could only see Constantinesco, who was in the compound superintending half a dozen Negroes at work.

'Has she gone out?'

He had nothing to say to Adèle, yet he missed her presence. Even if only to gaze at her indifferently, he wanted her about.

'She's left a note for you,' said the young trader.

At that moment Timar was standing opposite a mirror hung on the wall, and he could see his face. Its impassiveness at once annoyed him and made him thrill with pride. And yet, within, his mind was in a ferment.

'A note, you said?'

'Here it is.'

It struck Timar how like herself was Adèle's handwriting — clean-cut, vigorous, yet graceful.

Joe dear,

Don't be alarmed. I have to go to Libreville, but I shall be back in two or three days at the latest. Look after yourself carefully. Constantinesco will see to everything. And do please try not to worry.

Your Adèle.

'So she took the morning train?' said Timar ironically.

'She must have started before daylight, in the launch. When I got up an hour ago, she'd left already.'

Timar made no comment. He was pacing up and down the room, gazing straight in front of him, his hands linked behind his back.

'It's nothing serious, you know. As a matter of fact, I brought her the message. The magistrate wants to take her statement in connexion with that murder case. That's all.'

'Ah, you brought the message, did you?' Timar stared at the poor young man with withering contempt.

'There won't be any trouble. Now that the man has been sent up for trial, the case is as good as over. Only, as a formality, they have to take her evidence, as it was her revolver ...'

'Obviously.'

'Hullo. Where are you off to?'

Timar went straight to his room, shaved and dressed himself with a briskness he had not displayed for some time past. On coming down he accosted the young trader, who was still at breakfast.

'Can you hire me your launch?'

'Sorry, no. I've only just started on tour.'

'Two thousand francs?'

'Nothing doing, I'm afraid.'

'Five thousand?'

'Not even if you offered me fifty thousand! It's the firm's boat, you know, and I'm carrying mails. So you see ...'

Timar walked out without giving him another look. He heard an engine running in the shed where Constantinesco was at work, and found him lying flat on the ground, tuning up the dynamo.

Without a word of greeting Timar asked him point-blank :

'Did she let you know?'

'Well, as a matter of fact ...'

'Right. Now, listen! I want a canoe and boatmen at once. Have them ready within five minutes.'

'But ...'

'Did you hear what I said?'

'When she left she told me ...'

'Am I the master here or not?'

'I assure you, Monsieur Timar, that I'm only acting in your own interest. In your present state ...'

'What about it?'

'Sorry, sir, to annoy you, but it's my duty to prevent your going. ...'

Never had Timar felt so calm. Yet never had he had so many reasons for losing his self-control. He felt quite capable at that moment of shooting the Greek in cold blood, or stepping into a canoe and making the journey by himself if boatmen were not forthcoming.

'I beg you, sir,' the man implored. 'Think it over! In half an hour's time ...'

'I want the boat *at once*.'

The day was already warming up. Constantinesco put on

his sun-helmet and walked out of the shed towards the huts.

The trader's launch was still alongside and for a moment Timar thought of commandeering it. But why complicate matters?

The Greek was giving orders to some natives standing round him. They gazed at Timar, then at their dug-outs, then downstream.

'Well?'

'They say it's late; they'll have to halt for the night somewhere on the way down.'

'That's all right.'

'They tell me, too, that it'll take them three days getting back again, against the current.'

The Greek was gazing at Timar with more compassion than surprise. Probably he had come across similar cases, and his attitude to Timar was that of a doctor watching the progressive stages of a disease.

'Very well, sir. I'll come with you.'

'Certainly not. You must stay here and look after the concession. I wish the work to go on as usual. Got it?'

Constantinesco had some more talk with the men, then came back to Timar, who was standing in the shadow of the house.

'May I give you some useful tips, Monsieur Timar? For one thing, don't let your boatmen touch a drop of spirits, and you'll be wiser, if you don't mind my saying so, to keep off drinks yourself. In a motor-launch you've a certain amount of coolness, due to the speed of the boat, but in a dug-out the sun can be really deadly. Take the camp-bed, in case you have to sleep out in the bush. There's another thing ...' He seemed much more jumpy than the man he was addressing. 'Look here!' he broke out. 'You *must* let me go

too. I don't feel easy about you. Do you realize your coming like this will complicate things no end? Madame Adèle, if she's left to herself, will see it through, but ...'

'Ah, so she's been confiding in you?'

The Greek looked worried.

'No. But I'm used to that sort of thing. I know the ropes, you see. But you're fresh from Europe, you don't see life here from the same angle. When you've been ten years in Gabun ...'

'I'll amuse myself shooting niggers, eh?'

'You'll be compelled to, one day or another.'

'Have you killed many of them?'

'I came out to this country at a time when a white man in the jungle was greeted with a shower of arrows.'

'And you returned the greeting with your revolver, I suppose?'

'There's a man I know had to throw a dynamite cartridge into a bunch of 'em to save his skin, and it was a near thing at that, ... Have you had breakfast? No? Take my advice, have something to eat first; think it over ...'

'And give up my damn-fool idea?' Timar jeered. 'Thanks all the same. ... Hullo! You're still here, are you?'

The trader had just walked up to them. He asked Constantinesco :

'Any message for up there?'

By 'up there' he meant the higher reaches, where the jungle grew steadily denser. He turned to Timar.

'By the way, I'll be seeing that old loonie you were sent out to relieve. You know whom I mean? The man who says he'll shoot at sight. ...'

Some minutes later the three Europeans came down together to the river's edge, beside the log of okume. A Negro

started up the engine of the trader's launch; it shot out into mid-stream, then headed up the river.

Twelve men stood waiting beside a dug-out, in which they had stowed some palm-oil, cassava, and a few bunches of bananas. The air was sweltering. Each puff of wind scorched like a fiery caress. Constantinesco looked Timar in the eyes, as if to say :

'There's still time.'

Timar lit a cigarette; then held out the packet to the Greek.

'Thanks, I don't smoke.'

'That's a pity.'

Futile remarks, to bridge an awkward moment. Timar's eyes strayed to the slope leading up to the house, to the newly built huts thatched with plantain leaves, then to a window on the upper floor, facing the silk-cotton tree : the window from which he had gazed upon the nightbound jungle.

'Let's start,' he suddenly exclaimed.

The boatmen understood and settled down at their places in the dug-out; with the exception of the head boatman, who waited to help the white man step on board. Constantinesco hesitated for a moment, then blurted out :

'Excuse me, Monsieur Timar, but ... Look here, you're not going to give her trouble, are you? I mean, make things harder for her. She's such a splendid woman, I mean!'

Timar's eyes grew hard. He was on the point of answering; then changed his mind. What would be the use? With a sullen look he settled into his place in the dug-out while twelve elaborately carved paddles flashed across the light into the river.

The house dwindled rapidly into the distance; soon no

more could be seen than the red tiles of the roof, then nothing of the building; only the silk-cotton tree soaring in lonely eminence. The last time he had gazed at that silvery-white trunk had been when he was lying in the dark, at Adèle's side, holding his breath, feigning sleep. He had kept silence. Yet perhaps a word would have sufficed, even a slight movement of his arm. ...

And, after a while, when her hand had stolen humbly to his breast, he had pretended not to notice it. Now he felt like weeping with rage, desire, despair, and, above all, yearning for her presence.

They were on the same river, no more than twenty miles distant from each other; she in the launch, he huddled on the bottom of the swaying dug-out. The twelve paddles rose in a cataract of shining drops, hung for a moment poised in sunlight, and came down together with a great splash, while the boatmen broke into a plaintive, dirge-like melody, unvarying, timed to a massive rhythm, that was to continue, without a break, until the day was out.

CHAPTER X

The Black Girl

A SMALL, gap-toothed Negro rattled off a phrase of thirty words or so. When the paddles rose he stopped abruptly, and some moments of suspense ensued during which the dug-out glided onwards soundlessly, without the least vibration. Then, like the response of a litany, twelve voices answered in deep-throated unison, while the paddles struck the water twice.

After that the little Negro would start reciting again, in a high-pitched, sing-song voice.

The rhythm of the song tallied, beat for beat, with the two successive paddle-strokes. There was always the same lull, followed by the same outburst of lusty voices. After this had happened some five hundred times Timar started listening, frowningly intent, for the moment when the soloist was to recite, to see if he could make out some of the words. And presently he discovered that the man had gone on repeating exactly the same phrase, word for word — or almost so — for an hour on end.

He reeled off his patter without the least sign of interest in what he was saying, whereas the expressions of the others varied with each response; turn by turn they grinned, looked thrilled, or entertained, or even awed. And always, as the twelve paddles hung in air before the downward stroke, the twelve voices broke out at precisely the same moment.

After a while Timar discovered that he was watching these black men with an interest that was almost cordial; taking stock of his mood, he was amazed at its serenity. He was angry with himself for feeling thus; it was like an act of disloyalty to someone, to himself, to this supreme crisis of his life.

All the same, he very soon returned to observing the black men as before, but with the difference that now he fixed his interest on each individually, one after the other. There were stretches of smooth water and of rapids. Sometimes, though the boatmen strained their utmost, the dug-out swung broadside on across the current. Each thrust of the paddles gave the boat a violent jar, and at first Timar had found these constant shocks highly disagreeable. Gradually

he had got used to them, as he had got used to the smell of the black bodies. Most of the men wore loin-cloths, but three were stark naked.

The Negroes stood facing the prow and their eyes were always fixed on the white man sitting there. Timar wondered what, if anything, they thought about him personally, or if all white men were alike to them.

As for him, this was the first time he was observing Negroes otherwise than as decorative figures, tattooed so deeply that the intricate patterns stood out in relief, some wearing big silver earrings or quaint objects fixed in unlikely places — like that boatman with a clay pipe stuck flower-wise in his fuzzy hair.

Today he was looking on them as human beings, individuals with lives of their own; and just now this seemed quite simple, thanks perhaps to the primeval forest, the dug-out, this river that for untold centuries had ever borne such primitive craft seawards. Yes, these naked savages were far more understandable than the trouser-wearing blacks of Libreville, or table-boys like Thomas.

The scene was picturesque to a degree, and Timar could imagine his sister's and her girl friends' little shrieks of wonder, his male friends' more sophisticated smiles, could they have seen a snapshot of it. It answered exactly to the homekeeping Frenchman's conception of a settler's life in Equatorial Africa: the dug-out, Timar seated in the bows, clad in white ducks, sun-helmeted, and over him an awning of plantain-leaves which, without being told, the boatmen had fixed up in the prow, and which gave him, if not a majestic, an imposing air; and finally, most local-colourful of all, the twelve naked, or all but naked, Negroes standing in a line along the boat.

Actually the impression it produced on Timar was less of picturesqueness than of something natural and restful which soothed his nerves, took his mind off himself and his perplexities. Sounds, scents, and pictures crowded in upon him, but all were blurred by the intense heat and the glare which constrained him to keep his eyes half closed.

He saw these Negroes as simple, primitive folk with a certain natural *bonhomie* and a childish sense of fun, who set up an ear-splitting din whenever the dug-out passed a village or even a solitary hut. At such moments they drove the boat ahead at an amazing speed, whirling their paddles aloft and emitting yells of triumph that evoked answering yells from the river-bank.

At one point some young Negroes plunged into the river and started trying to race the boat, which easily outpaced them. One of them shouted to Timar: 'Cigarette, Massa! Give cigarette!' making the gesture of flinging something into the water. Timar tossed a handful of cigarettes towards them and, looking back, saw the youngsters fighting for the sodden cigarettes in a cloud of golden spray, then scrambling up the bank with their trophies and capering away into the forest.

Above all there had come over him a great calm, though, for some reason he could not fathom, it was tinged with sadness. Yet some capacity for emotion remained, though lacking a specific object, and it pleased him to feel that he was on the point of understanding this mysterious continent which until now had brought out only his least healthy instincts.

On entering a reach of sluggish water the boatmen brought the dug-out alongside the bank and made it fast. Though wholly unprotected and incapable of making him-

self understood by his men, Timar had not the faintest sense of apprehension. Far from it, he had a feeling that they had taken him under their wing, were treating him like a child for whose safety they were responsible.

Standing waist-high in the river, they sluiced their heads and shoulders, took mouthfuls of the water, gargled and spat it out. Timar felt that he, too, would relish the coolness of the water on his lips. But as he bent down, the gap-toothed Negro, noticing what he was up to, shook his head.

‘No good for white man!’

Why wasn’t it good for white men? Timar had no idea, but he felt sure the advice was sound. And when the Negro told him to eat he obediently opened a tin of corned beef. The blacks merely nibbled cassava or bananas.

Nothing could be seen in the darkness of the jungle, but on one occasion Timar saw the boatmen listening intently. When he looked at them questioningly, one of the men made a comical face, guffawed, and said :

‘Macaque!’

The monkey kept out of sight, though its movements could be heard in the branches. The sun was still high. Two or three times Timar took a pull at the bottle of whisky, and gradually he relapsed into an agreeable, dreamy languor.

His eyes were still open and he fell to amusing himself by comparing the boatmen’s faces with those of people he had known at home, tracing resemblances between them. From France his thoughts drifted back to Libreville: to the Governor, the Superintendent, Bouilloux, and Adèle. And for a while the spell of peace was broken. Shutting his eyes, he felt the fever stirring in his blood.

Anger seethed up in him and he felt a need to egg himself on with a drink to vent his rancour; sudden impulses

to shout, to inflict pain on someone – on himself as well. At one such moment he half opened his eyes and yelled at the Negroes, who were singing the usual refrain :

‘Shut up! Stop that blasted noise!’

At first the words took no effect. The gap-toothed man, however, who knew a few words of French, turned to the others and interpreted the order. No one protested. They stopped singing and gazed at the white man. No emotion was visible in the twelve pairs of eyes, yet somehow they made him feel uncomfortable, especially when he raised the whisky bottle to his lips. ...

So those were the people whom any European shot down without the least compunction. They indeed were no better. Hadn't he been assured that every one of them was capable of poisoning a man without a qualm – in all innocence?

The word ‘innocence’ brought a smile to his lips. That hit it very well. Here in Africa no idea of guilt attached to murder. Whites killed blacks, and blacks killed men of their own colour, and sometimes, but rarely, a European. Without malice. Innocently. Because one must.

Still, none of them had a murderer's face. Wait though! What about that little gap-toothed fellow? He might well have killed his man. With tiny hairs, steeped in venom and mixed into the victim's food, that gradually bore through the intestines. Or else by scattering poisoned thorns in front of his victim's hut.

There was another stop. Timar was puzzled at first. Then two men came and fixed some plantain leaves behind him, to protect his neck from the sun, which was nearing the horizon. Quite likely those two men were poisoners too!

He had another drink, but the whisky did not have its usual effect. There was no rush of fury, no tension of his

nerves. He lay down and, closing his eyes, gave himself up to melancholy brooding.

Only when night was falling did he come back to reality. Darkness had spread across the sky like a patch of oil on a blue lake; there was no interval of twilight. They had come to a wide reach of the river where the current was slow. Beside the dug-out, and under the trees lining the banks, the water was inky black. Somewhere in the far distance a tom-tom thudded mournfully. As the white man had forbidden them to sing, the boatmen made do with a grunt at each stroke of the paddles.

It was useless for Timar to ask where they were. Even if they understood the question, he would not understand their answer. Where would he sleep the night? What was he doing here? Adèle had promised to be back in two or three days. Why had he not waited for her at the concession, where anyhow there was another white man?

What would he do at Libreville? He had no idea. The truth was, he had resented being treated like a child, he was afraid of being looked upon as an accomplice, and above all, he was jealous. What had brought Bouilloux to the concession? And why had Adèle lied about it?

His unrest was returning. He gulped down some tepid spirit and felt so nauseated that for some moments he leaned over the side of the dug-out.

As night closed in the boatmen ceased keeping stroke as accurately as before. They paddled feverishly, and sometimes two paddles clashed in air. And instead of gazing at the white man they kept looking towards the forest, up to the moment when with one powerful thrust they drove the boat against the bank, amongst the undergrowth.

Not until he had gone on shore did Timar recognize the

spot. It was the village where he and Adèle had landed on their way upstream; where Adèle had entered a native hut and eaten two bananas.

A fire was burning in the middle of the clearing round which stood the huts, and shadowy forms squatted beside it. Timar dared not make a move until the little gap-toothed man, whom he had come to look on as his cicerone, had rejoined him.

When Timar's boatmen landed, the villagers seated round the fire merely looked over their shoulders at the newcomers without moving. Three of the boatmen started towards the village, carrying Timar's camp-kit. The little man beckoned to him to follow.

Few words, twenty at most, were exchanged between the villagers and the boatmen. The little man made a tour of inspection, opening doors and peeping inside the huts; none of the occupants thought of protesting. Finally he halted at a fair-sized hut and ordered out of it one of the old crones whom some days previously Timar had seen sitting beside their mats in the village market-place.

The Negro threw outside the mats strewn on the floor of the hut, then, pointing to the interior, said gravely :

'This plenty good place.'

After seeing Timar's kit installed, he slipped away, leaving Timar alone in the hut. Only in the centre could he stand without stooping. The air was thick with smoke; a fire had evidently been burning in the hut all day, and the ashes were still warm.

He spent ten minutes wrestling with the camp-bed, whose fittings baffled him, before he managed to set it up more or less securely. Then he went to the door and stood there smoking a cigarette. His boatmen, who had joined the

villagers at the fire, were finishing their meal; shadowy forms crouching around the fire and plunging their hands into eating bowls containing boiled cassava.

Someone was talking away as volubly as the chorus-leader on the boat. Perhaps indeed it was he; the voice was just the same. After rattling off three or four sentences, all of which sounded alike, he would stop abruptly. A roar of laughter from his audience replaced the boatmen's chorus.

Was he talking about Timar? For a while Timar suspected it; then, after watching certain faces lit up by the firelight, he came to the conclusion he was talking gibberish. He could have sworn that the toothless man was uttering strings of disconnected words for the mere joy of saying them, and the others were intoxicated by the jingle of the words and their own laughter. Like children who talk for talking's sake, without bothering if the words make sense.

There was a pleasant tang in the air of burning wood and some highly aromatic spice unknown to Timar; also the musty smell of the black bodies. And it was this last which most affected him.

He had no appetite and did not trouble to open any of the tinned provisions he had brought. Now and then, however, he took a sip of whisky, followed by a cigarette. Against the dark mass of the hut his white form must have been extremely noticeable, but no one cast a glance in his direction. Humiliated, almost aggrieved, by their indifference, he called out 'Cigarette?' and threw one towards the nearest Negro.

He had found twenty packets in the camp-bed; presumably Constantinesco had stowed them there. The Negro picked up the cigarette, rose to his feet, grinning, and exhibited it to the others. An old woman looked round and,

after a moment's hesitation, held out both hands towards Timar.

He threw a whole packetful and there was a general scramble, a *mêlée* of capering shadows in the firelight. Some bolder spirits ran up to him, holding out their hands, laughing and squealing. There were women amongst them. Timar felt their bodies rubbing against him and, standing on tiptoe, stretched out his arms above their heads, dropping cigarettes at arm's length.

There were little girls as well, with tiny, budding breasts. The musty smell grew more pronounced as the crowd of women closed in on him. But Timar had eyes only for the handsome Negress he had seen on the trip up-river, talking to the driver of the launch. Though not so bold as the youngsters, she had come fairly near, and her eyes implored him to throw some cigarettes in her direction.

Timar launched three packets in succession. One was caught before it fell; a dozen piccaninnies scrambled for the others in the dust amongst the grown-ups' legs.

The young Negress had big, firm breasts. Her hips, like a young man's, were narrower than her bust, but her belly was still plump, protuberant as a child's. They gazed at each other, she and he, across the surging throng. She was saying something in a pleading tone, and he could only smile in answer.

After tossing the last packet towards her Timar shouted :
'Finished! No more left.'

But they went on holding out their hands until the gap-toothed nigger explained that the white man had no more to give them. Then the crowd dispersed as quickly as it had gathered, and a moment later all were squatting round the fire again. Thick lips pursed around the cigarettes, the

blacks gazed proudly at the smoke curling up from their mouths. Often the same cigarette was passed from mouth to mouth between three people.

Timar remained standing in front of his hut. He was ready for bed, but the memory of the young Negress would not leave his mind; what he felt was not mere lust but a vague yearning for affection. He found a low bench and sat down on it. He had forgotten to keep any cigarettes for himself. Women dragging small children after them were going into the huts, which very soon grew silent. No more wood was placed on the fire. The boatmen were the first to move off.

Where would they sleep? Timar neither knew nor cared. The girl seemed to have vanished, and he peered into the shadows, wondering when she had left the others and which hut she had entered. He was still quite calm, still mournful, but with a sadness of no thoughts, like an animal's. Only five or six dark forms lingered beside the fire and no one spoke.

Suddenly a tremor passed through his body. There, quite near him in the shadows, was the young Negress, leaning against the door of the next hut and looking towards him. Had she guessed? Had she taken a fancy to him or was she merely submitting to his whim because he was a white man?

Bouilloux, he imagined, would merely have jerked his thumb towards the door of the hut, then followed her in. Timar was too shy; nor dared he move towards her. He was conscious of his inexpertness; in any case, he had not yet made up his mind whether he really wanted her.

However, he had risen to his feet. And now he saw her take a step towards him, hesitate, ready to retreat if he seemed not to want her. He remained standing at the door

of the hut, leaving enough space for her to pass; with a slight movement of his hand he pointed to the interior.

She stepped hastily within, halted, her bosom heaving; none of the Negroes round the fire had looked round. Timar thought of shutting the door, but he did not dare. And he was tongue-tied, knowing she would not understand a word of what he said.

She had ceased looking at him and was gazing at the floor of beaten earth, demure as a European girl visiting a bachelor flat for the first time! With the difference that, but for a wisp of dry grass hung below her navel, she was naked.

He patted her shoulder. The first time he had touched black skin deliberately. It was smooth as satin, and he could feel the ripple of the muscles underneath.

He pretended to hunt for cigarettes, though he knew he had none left. He wanted to give her something, and could see nothing but a thermos flask. Exploring his pockets, his fingers came in contact with his watch, a present from his uncle. It had a chain attached; he unhooked the chain and held it towards her.

'Present for you,' he mumbled.

He felt terribly perplexed. Looking over his shoulder, he noticed that the Negroes round the fire had gone. What was he to do? How set about it? Did he really want her? He had no notion! His mouth was dry. The girl was standing motionless in the centre of the hut, the gold chain resting in the palm of her hand.

He came near her again, fondled her shoulder as he had done before, then let his hand stray downwards and cup her breast.

She neither encouraged nor discouraged him. She was staring at the gold chain.

'Come!'

He walked towards the camp-bed. She followed ~~and~~ missively.

'Are you ...?' He wanted to ask her if she was a virgin, for in that case he'd have refrained. But he could not make her understand.

'Sit down.'

Pressing on her shoulder, he forced her on to the edge of the bed. Extraordinarily embarrassed, he picked up the whisky bottle and tilted it to his lips; then stumbled to the latchless door of the hut and pushed it to.

CHAPTER XI

Bouilloux Intervenes

QUITE early in the morning's run something happened that put Timar in a bad humour. They were shooting some rapids, and the boatmen took a mischievous delight in paddling for all they were worth, their mouth agape as much with laughter as with the effort. The dug-out hurtled along like a speed-boat. At the foot of the rapids there was a bend of the river and a patch of broken water, which they proposed to take with a rush.

A branch trailed in the water just ahead, and its dense leafage made it look like an island in mid-stream. The dug-out could have cleared it easily, but out of devilment the Negroes headed towards it, plying their paddles more frantically than ever.

Twelve pairs of big round eyes beamed with childish glee as they gazed at the half-submerged branch, then at the

broken water, then at the white man's face. Their idea was to crash through the leafage and give Timar and themselves a little thrill.

They negotiated the first few feet of the branch without mishap, but then there came a violent shock and the boat seemed to leap out of the water, listing heavily. It was so sudden that Timar had no time to realize what had happened. There was no great danger. Before it could capsize the natives righted the dug-out by a concerted lunge with the full weight of their bodies to one side.

But they had shipped a good deal of water, and Timar found himself sitting in a pool several inches deep.

Abruptly he lost his temper, and starting hurling futile insults at the boatmen. The knowledge what a sight he must look, splashed with muddy water from head to foot, added to his vexation.

Another source of annoyance was that he had no cigarettes. And rankling always at the back of his mind was the memory that he had slept with a black woman.

She had slipped away some time in the night; on waking he had found her gone. When he went to the dug-out, followed by his boatmen, he had seen a group of women and children on the river-bank. Amongst them was the girl, but she had not dared to make herself conspicuous by showing signs of recognition, making any gesture.

When he caught sight of her he all but stopped; then thought better of it and went to his seat in the bows, while the men, paddle in hand, lined up at their places in the boat.

He saw the girl edging away from the others and looking hard at him.

The twelve paddles struck the water, and instantly, as it

seemed, the dug-out was twenty yards out, in mid-stream. Only then did Timar see the girl raise her arm or, rather, move it hesitantly a few inches from her body in a timid gesture of farewell.

The hull had been slightly cracked by its impact on the snag, and one of the men had to keep baling out, his two hands cupped together.

After watching him for some time Timar opened his last tin of corned beef, threw the contents into the stream and handed the empty tin to the negro.

The boatmen gaped at him dumbfounded. They knew that a tin of corned beef cost a good twelve francs, about what one of them earned by a fortnight's work. The man who used the empty tin as a scoop seemed fascinated by the white flash of the metal as he plunged it in the water, and the others cast envious glances at him.

But Timar had lost interest in the Negroes. As he neared his goal, the old anxieties came crowding back into his mind. Presumably Adèle had reached Libreville fairly early in the previous afternoon, as the launch had been aided by the current. Where had she slept? With whom had she dined? What had she been doing all the morning?

During the first few hours his adventure with the black girl still lingered in his mind. But as the sun crossed the zenith his thoughts were all of Adèle. Above all he was haunted by memories of that last night they had spent side by side, staring up at the ceiling, feigning sleep but keeping watch on each other in the darkness, every sense keyed to its highest pitch.

He would have liked to learn at what time they expected to reach Libreville, but couldn't make the gap-toothed man understand his question. The hours dragged on. Twice he

had them stop the dug-out and readjust the awning of leaves above his head. At one moment he asked roughly :

‘Why the devil don’t you sing?’

As the boatmen failed to understand, he himself started the refrain. Then they exchanged happy glances, as if a load had been lifted off their minds, and the little man launched into a recitative, even more prolix than his previous efforts.

But now Timar didn’t listen. After five minutes he ceased even to be aware the men were singing. ... Why had Bouil-loux come to the concession? Why had Adèle left without letting him know?

He dozed off occasionally, but never slept for long. In fact, it was not sleep but a sort of coma due to the glare and heat. At last the sun dipped behind the forest, there was a brief dusk giving an illusion of coolness, and the milder light restored its colours to the landscape. A quarter of an hour later darkness had fallen and Libreville was not yet in sight. Timar was furious, all the more so because it was impossible to make the boatmen understand his questions.

After moving for an hour along the nightbound river, two specks of light appeared, one green, one red. Higher up, in the sky, another light, not a star, was twinkling. And a moment later Timar heard a clatter of footsteps on a deck and the sound of a gramophone.

The black bulk of a cargo-steamer loomed up overhead. They had entered the estuary at the point where Timar had seen the other steamer loading timber. The record ran out, but they forgot to stop the gramophone; in the stillness the scratching of the needle could be distinctly heard.

A searchlight blazed out, and the vivid beam raked the surface of the river for some moments before settling on

the dug-out. It was directed from the Captain's bridge. Leaning on the rail, three men watched the boat glide past. They evidently noticed that there was a European on board, for someone shouted :

'Hullo! Who's there?'

Timar kept silent – why, he didn't know. He remained crouching in the bows, lost in gloomy meditation; he gave a start when the dug-out came into rough water and started pitching.

Before him lay the open sea and on his right a string of lights, a wharf like any other, like a real wharf in Europe, and motor headlights flitting through the night.

The dug-out grounded on the sandy beach where the fish-bazaar was held each morning, amongst the native craft. Negroes in coats and trousers, others in Arab dress, were walking on the quay. For Timar it was like a home-coming after long absence in foreign parts.

The red road glowed darkly under the electric lamps; the green of the foliage was so vivid as to seem artificial. It reminded Timar of a stage setting, especially the palm grove, whose leafage, lit up from below, stood out in bright relief against the velvety black sky.

And there were noises: voices, footsteps, rumbling wheels; a passing car whose passengers did not even glance to see who was the lonely traveller coming up from the dark foreshore.

The three naked niggers hastily wound strips of muslin round their loins, while the others dragged the boat higher up the beach. Timar wondered what to do. Should he tell his men to go back to the concession, or keep them here? Was it up to him to provide them with food and lodging? Would they manage to fend for themselves in a town? He

went to the gap-toothed man and tried to get some information.

'You can sleep here?' Putting his hand against his cheek, he bent his head to one side, closing his eyes.

The Negro grinned, made a would-be reassuring gesture.

'Me go see Madame.'

Of course! The decision rested with her, and Timar had no say in it. The boatman had put him in his place, and his place was that of a 'sleeping partner', 'Madame's' satellite! He wasn't even a real 'coaster', for he could not speak the native language; hadn't even taken a pot-shot at the wild-duck flying overhead during their journey down the river. Instead he had lavished cigarettes. He hadn't knocked a single nigger down. He hadn't pointed out the places where to stop. In fact, he was an amateur, a greenhorn.

'Me go see Madame.'

Turning his back on the man, Timar stepped on to the lamp-lit road. His clothes were soiled and shabby as a result of the accident to the dug-out. There was a two-days' growth of beard on his chin. Just as he came under a street lamp he heard a car slow down. A face peered from the window and he recognized the Police Superintendent, who did not stop the car, though he looked back twice as he drove on.

The hotel was less than three hundred yards away. In a dark corner of the quay a Negress in a blue *pagne* was giggling as she rubbed herself against a smartly dressed nigger. The woman was plump, like most city-dwelling black women, and her fuzzy hair was built up into an elaborate coiffure. She had lost the respect for Europeans which comes naturally to almost all up-country natives, and though while Timar walked by she stared at him in silence,

he heard her going into shrieks of laughter when he was a few yards away.

Trivial details! Still, in his present mood, they affected him unpleasantly and added to his rankling sense of grievance.

At the hotel the gramophone was in full blast, playing a Hawaiian record that he had heard fifty times before, and billiard-balls were clicking.

He halted for a moment on the threshold, frowning, in an unconscious effort to give himself an intimidating air. A wasted effort; nobody had noticed his arrival. The pot-bellied clerk and one of the timber men, who were playing billiards, had their backs to him and partially masked him from four other men seated at a table near the gramophone. The four men had their heads bent together like people engaged in a secret and important conference. The clock pointed to eleven. There was nobody at the bar.

Stepping back for a stroke, the clerk collided with the counter, and looked round.

'Hullo! So you're here, old chap!' The tone was cordial enough, but the man was obviously flustered. He shouted to the others: 'Look who's blown in!'

Everyone stared. None seemed particularly surprised, but there was no mistaking their vexation. Timar was the last person they wanted to see just now. Some glances were exchanged; then Bouilloux rose and walked towards him, exclaiming with false heartiness:

'Well, well! What a surprise! How the devil did you get here? By plane?'

'By boat.'

Bouilloux gave a little whistle of admiration for the feat. Then he held out his hand, saying:

'How about a drink?'

Timar shook hands with him reluctantly, not daring to ignore the other's gesture. He could see that Bouilloux had had an inkling he might come and that this was what he had dreaded most.

The billiard-players went on with their game. Someone put another record on the gramophone.

'Had your dinner?' Bouilloux enquired.

'No ... I mean, yes. I'm not hungry.'

'Look here, my boy, you've not been taking your quinine regularly. One's only got to look at your eyes. Damned foolish, that!'

Bouilloux's tone was genial enough, almost paternal, but his attitude was stiff. The one-eyed man, one of the group at the table, was watching Timar glumly. Suddenly Martain, who was with him, rose.

'It's late. I'm off to bed.'

He shook hands quickly, giving the impression of someone who anticipates a scene and wants to get away before anything unpleasant happens. For the first time in his life Timar found himself the focus of interest in a dramatic situation. Obviously the part that fell to him was that of a potential trouble-maker who needs humouring – which reminded him that he had a revolver in his pocket.

'Come and have a drink on the house.'

Bouilloux shepherded him towards the bar, slipped behind it and poured out two glasses of Calvados.

'Here's luck, old boy! Take a pew!'

Timar got on to one of the high stools and drank the liqueur at a gulp, staring grimly at the man behind the bar. They weren't going to play fast and loose with him – he'd see to that! He had a feeling that the billiard-players were

going on with their game merely for appearance's sake, the men near the gramophone talking merely for talking's sake.

At that moment nothing mattered except himself and Bouilloux, or, rather, the clash of wills that was impending between them.

'The same again,' said Timar, holding out his glass.

Bouilloux hesitated. He was afraid! Noting which, Timar deliberately accentuated his scowl, feigning a self-assurance he was far from feeling.

'Where's Adèle?'

Bottle in hand, the other man grinned at him and said with a chuckle, trying to gain time:

'Aha! Still as much in love as ever? What a time you two love-birds must have up there all on your lonesome, with no damned spoil-sports butting in! You don't know your luck!'

Every word rang false.

'Where is she?'

'Where is she? How the devil should I know?'

'Is she at the hotel?'

'Why should she be at the hotel? Here's the best! Tell me, how long did the run down take you in your dug-out?'

'That's neither here nor there. ... So Adèle hasn't been to the hotel?'

'I never said that. If you must know, she's been here; but she isn't here just now.'

Timar had taken the bottle from his hand and poured himself out a third drink. Suddenly he swung round on the billiard-players and saw that they had stopped playing and were listening with all their ears. The clerk turned hastily to his companion.

'Your shot! That cannon's a sitter, I should say.

Never had Timar felt his nerves so violently on edge, and yet his brain so clear. He felt capable of anything, there was no extreme to which he couldn't go, without turning a hair! His gaze returned to Bouilloux, settled on him still more darkly.

He saw himself as a commanding, awe-inspiring figure — whereas in reality he looked merely a sick man, in the throes of fever. His face was livid, he seemed on the brink of a nervous collapse, and it was this that so perturbed the others. So much so that Bouilloux, picking up the two glasses, said quietly :

'Come with me, my boy. We'll have a little talk.'

He led Timar to a corner where they could talk unheard by the others, placed bottle and glasses on the table, rested his elbows on it and stretched his right hand towards Timar's.

The men at the other table rose and walked to the door.

'Good night, Louis. Good night, all.'

Footsteps receded on the road outside. Only the billiard-players stayed behind; there was something strained in their intentness on their game.

'Keep calm. It's not the moment to play the fool.' The tone was gruff but kindly, almost paternal, and brought to Timar's mind the voices of certain priests he had known in his younger days. 'Now let's have it out as man to man. There's no point in trying to beat about the bush, is there now?'

While speaking, he watched Timar's face. He took a sip at his Calvados, but moved the bottle away when he saw Timar reach towards it.

'Not yet.'

The Negro masks hung at their old places on the colour-washed walls. Nothing was changed. The only difference was that Adèle no longer presided at the bar; Adèle in her black silk dress, poring over her accounts or, her chin cupped in her hand, gazing dreamily into space.

'The case is coming up for trial to-morrow. You know what that means, eh?'

He had brought his face near Timar's. A curious face. On a close-up view it had none of the coarseness Timar had got used to reading into it; once again it reminded him of a father confessor of his youth, who had the same gruff way of talking.

'Everything's fixed up. We've seen to it that Adèle won't be landed in trouble of any kind. And it took the devil of a lot of managing, let me tell you!'

'Where is she?'

'I tell you, I don't know. ... Your name won't crop up at the trial. Oh, and by the way, there's no use letting it be known that you're at Libreville. Well, have you tumbled to it? Adèle's a dear little thing, and it would be just too bad if she'd to do a stretch.'

A queer thing was taking place. Timar heard the words and understood them, but simultaneously he had the impression of seeing what lay behind them – as if they were a sort of trellis-work.

'A dear little thing.' That was how they talked of her. And they'd slept with her, every man-jack of them! Boon companions, a happy band of bed-fellows – and now he'd come butting into the gang, an interloper! No wonder they loathed the sight of him. Like a child in a temper who refuses to listen to reason, he repeated:

'Where is she?'

Bouilloux nearly lost heart. He drank off his liqueur, and prevented Timar from pouring out another one for himself.

'Listen! Out here white folk hang together. Whatever she did, she'd *got* to do it. Anyhow it's done, and talking won't mend matters. I tell you everything's O.K. and all you've got to do is to sit tight and not worry ...'

'Look here! When she was your mistress ...'

'No, lad, that's not true.'

'But you told me ...'

'That's a different thing. Do try to understand, damn it! It's a serious business, you know. I told you I'd slept with Adèle. Other fellows too. But there's no connexion ...'

Timar gave a shrill laugh.

'I tell you that was quite a different thing. And that's why, as things stand, I'm damned if I'll allow ...' He stopped abruptly. Timar had gone quite white and Bouilloux noticed that his fists were clenched. 'One's got to take life as one finds it,' he went on hastily. 'There's some things can't be helped. Don't forget that in those days Adèle had Eugène with her. You still don't see what I'm driving at? Well, what proves it isn't the same thing is that Eugène never got jealous over — what she did. He knew better!'

Timar grinned, but he felt more like weeping with shame.

'With us "coasters", and the big bugs like the Governor and his lot, it didn't amount to more than ... than a sort of act of politeness, a business transaction, if you like. No more than that.' His voice grew harsh, almost threatening. 'I've known Adèle for ten years. Well, I honestly think

you're the first she's felt like that for. And if I'd known how things were going to turn out, I'd have done all in my power to stop her. So now you know!'

He fell silent. There was strong emotion in his voice when he spoke again.

'It's just as well Eugène passed out that night – or anything might have happened. You still don't understand? Damn it, has one got to explain *everything* one says to you? Now listen to me, young man: Adèle is in a nasty jam. It's a miracle she's managed to wriggle half-way out of it; only half way, mind you, as the case won't be decided till to-morrow. So, as I said, there's some of us here who won't allow ...'

Again he paused. Had he an inkling he had gone too far? Or was it the look on Timar's face that alarmed him: its paleness mottled by the glowing fever-spots, the purplish lips and unnaturally bright eyes? And the lean fingers twitching on the polished table?

'Well, well! Hard words don't take one anywhere. I'll only tell you this: Adèle knows what she's about.'

The billiard-balls kept on clicking, the two men moving conscientiously round the table.

'So that's that. She's acting for the best. It'll all be over by to-morrow evening, and she'll go back with you to the bush. Here's good luck to you both! Whether she was right or not in leaving Libreville – well, that's her concern, and nobody else's.'

'Where is she?'

'Where is she? Haven't an idea! And no one has any right to question her about it. You, least of all. See what I mean? You ask me where she is? Perhaps in bed with someone – trying to save her neck!'

Bouilloux swung round towards the boy who was standing motionless beside the bar.

'Close for the night. ... And you,' he added, turning to the billiard-players, 'clear out!'

It was he who was losing his temper now! Timar was at a loss what to say. But his hand moved towards the pocket in which was the revolver. There was a sound of closing shutters and the two men going away.

Bouilloux had risen to his feet and, almost as wrought up as Timar, was looking down on him, his huge bulk towering above the younger man's.

'If that's the only way she has of saving her skin, what bloody right have you to grouse about it, you ...?' He clenched his fist menacingly, while Timar's hand closed round the revolver.

Then suddenly the ferocity died from his face; he grew human, cordial, and tapped the young man on the shoulder.

'No, my boy, you've nothing to worry about. It'll all come right. Just you have a good night's sleep. By to-morrow evening she'll be out of the wood and you'll be able to take her home with you and make love to your heart's content.'

Timar poured himself out a final glass of spirits and drank it off. He still looked haggard and there was a dangerous glint in his eyes, but when Bouilloux took his arm and led him to the door he offered no resistance. He heard Bouilloux's voice behind him as he walked upstairs.

'Yes, she's one in a thousand. Every one of us should take his hat off to Adèle.'

Almost everything that happened after that remained a blank in Timar's memory; he had no idea who handed him a candlestick, how he found his way to the bedroom in

which, flinging himself fully dressed upon the bed, he tore down the mosquito-net.

All he could remember was that he wept passionately, waked with a start just as the candle was guttering out, and hugged the pillow frantically to his breast, as if it were Adèle.

CHAPTER XII

Breaking Point

LIKE the cemetery, the Courthouse had a makeshift air; all the traditions of a court of justice seemed to have been studiously avoided, and it was difficult to take it seriously. That, perhaps, was why Timar found his thoughts harking back to Eugène Renaud's funeral.

The big bare room might have been the interior of a go-down. There was none of the dark oak panelling, the carved woodwork, or any of the impressive paraphernalia of a European courtroom. Whitewashed walls; four big windows opening on a verandah packed with Negroes, the town-dwellers wearing clothes, the jungle folk naked or almost naked, some standing, others squatting on their hunkers.

There was no seating accommodation for the public, no dock for the accused, no judge's bench. The portion of the room reserved for members of the Court was merely roped off, and practically all the Europeans present were allowed within the official enclosure.

On the other side of the rope was a motley assemblage of Negroes, Spaniards and Portuguese, with a sprinkling of French people who, like Timar, had arrived late.

There was a table with a green table-cloth, at the centre of which sat a man who was presumably the presiding judge. Were the men beside him assessors, Timar wondered, or was the decision solely with the Judge? And what were the Public Prosecutor and the Police Superintendent up to, lounging in cane chairs as if the place belonged to them? And all those others, whom Timar had never seen before, and who had managed to secure seats for themselves near the Judge?

Behind the open windows the motionless forms of Negroes stood out against the glare. All the Europeans were in white, and many had kept their topees on. Several were smoking; it was quite a family party!

Hemmed in by natives, Timar had difficulty at first in seeing Adèle.

He had not been able to get to sleep until the small hours. Bouilloux, intentionally no doubt, had omitted to wake him, and it was striking ten when he opened his eyes. Hurrying downstairs, he found the hotel empty except for a single table-boy. Unwashed, unshaven, in his soiled and crumpled clothes, he had rushed off to the Courthouse, without even stopping for a cup of coffee. He had plunged through the crowd into the stuffy courtroom, and some minutes had been needed for him to get used to the atmosphere and take stock of his surroundings.

All the white men without exception seemed prostrated by the heat. In front of him, beside the rope partitioning the room, a typical bush nigger, half naked and coarse-featured, was reciting some interminable story in a sing-song voice. Now and then he made a timid gesture, displaying a surprisingly white palm; the rest of the time he stood stiffly to attention, his heels together.

Was anyone attending to what he said? The white men were talking amongst themselves. From time to time the Judge would glance at the windows, shout an order, and the crowd on the verandah moved back a few steps, only to surge forward again a moment later.

Timar had no idea who the native was, or what he was saying. But he could now see, not far from the Public Prosecutor, Adèle's black dress and a portion of her face. Evidently she had not observed his presence yet. She seemed to be signalling to someone.

The Negro gabbled on and on in a toneless, mournful voice. On the wall facing him hung a large clock of the kind found in all Government offices, with a glossy white dial and a minute-hand that moved in jerks. A servant pushed his way to the Judge's table and set on it a tray with glasses, a bottle and a siphon. The men at the table helped themselves to drinks, paying even less attention to the witness than before.

Just then Adèle caught sight of Timar. She went quite white and gazed at him with startled eyes; he returned her gaze with a cool, hostile stare.

He had not eaten anything since the previous afternoon. The stench of the serried mass of Negroes was growing stronger all the time. He felt a sudden dizziness, which the strain of standing on tiptoe – the only way in which he could see anything – made worse.

Suddenly the Judge glanced at the clock, which stood at a quarter to eleven, and spoke for the first time.

'That's enough. You can stand down.'

The Negro did not understand, but some instinct told him to stop speaking.

'Interpreter, translate his statement.'

The remark was addressed to another Negro, wearing spectacles and European clothes: white trousers, a black coat, and a celluloid collar. He began speaking in a deep, guttural voice, like a distant growl of thunder:

'Your honour, the man says he had never set eyes on Thomas, seeing as they come not from the same village, and he did not even know that such a man as Thomas existed.'

This sentence took him a good three minutes to bring out. The Judge cried angrily:

'Speak up, man!'

'He says it is because of the goats he claimed from his brother-in-law because his wife ran off with a man from another village. She was one of the headman's daughters, and his head wife, and she went telling everyone ...'

No one listened, Timar no more than the others. He hadn't the patience to try to follow the long rambling statement, some portions of which, moreover, failed to reach his ears. He was looking at Adèle. Whose bed had she shared last night?

Had she, as usual, nothing on under the black silk dress? Had some other man watched the whiteness of her body, the supple thighs and slightly drooping breasts emerging from their black sheath as she drew it over her shoulders? ... The interpreter rumbled on:

'They would not give him back the she-goat, and so ...'

Then four other Negroes started speaking all at once in some up-country dialect, sometimes questioning the man, sometimes wrangling amongst themselves. The accused, whose only garment was a rag tied round his waist, stared at them with consternation.

One had only to watch the proceedings for a while, without following them attentively, to find them utterly fan-

tastic, like a grotesque dream or a piece of calculated clowning. A whisky bottle stood on the 'bench', the white men were passing round cigarettes, exchanging audible remarks.

Bouilloux was amongst them, with his boon companions and the lawyer's clerk. Standing beside a window, at the edge of the roped-in enclosure, they formed an intermediate group between the officials and the blacks. Bouilloux was the first to raise his voice :

'That's enough of it!'

Some of the other white men echoed him.

The Judge shook a little tinkly bell, more like a child's toy than an adjunct of a Court.

'We have now to hear Amami's wife. Where is she?'

From the doorway where she had been standing she was pushed forward through the crowd up to the rope. A black crone, with scraggy breasts, embossed tattoo-marks on her chest and stomach, a shaven head.

She stayed where she had been placed, silent, unseeing. Subconsciously Timar's mind began to march again. He saw her, first side-face, then at another angle, and somehow she recalled the Negro girl who had slept with him two nights before. Not only her features, but the line of hips and shoulders resembled those of the girl. Perhaps she was the girl's mother. In that case the accused, the little man who had gabbled away for so long, might well be the father.

And suddenly he found himself contrasting the young, gracefully moulded body he had possessed, a thing of vivid beauty, with the lamentable aspect of the old couple. But for a few rags they were naked; their skin was shrivelled, lustreless.

They were standing a yard from each other. Timar intercepted a glance that passed between them, and realized

that they had lost all track of where they were, what was expected of them, and, above all, why all these people seemed so angry with them. Especially the husband, who had a snub nose and little bloodshot eyes. In the panicked glances he cast around him there was a glint of madness.

No one paid the least attention to them. Just then Timar noticed that Bouilloux was giving him a meaning glance, even making a slight movement of his head. half cajoling, half threatening, which clearly signified: 'Watch your step, my lad!'

The woman began to speak in a level tone, giving every syllable the same emphasis, mechanically knotting and un-knotting her scanty loin-cloth as she spoke. To steady herself she kept her gaze fixed on a brown smudge, the remains of a squashed fly, a few inches to the left of the wall-clock.

Timar's eyes fell on one of his boatmen at a window; the man's face split in a wide grin. The heat was still increasing. One could almost see the steam rising from the bodies of the crowd. Fumes of pipe and cigarette smoke mingled with the stale odour of black men's and the more acrid tang of white men's sweat.

Sometimes one of the Europeans rose and walked quietly to the door, returning five minutes later. He had been to the hotel for a 'quick one'.

Timar was hot, hungry and thirsty, but his nerves were keyed to their highest pitch, and he held out. Whenever he tried to catch Adèle's eye she looked away; just now she was listening to some long story that a white man Timar had not seen before was whispering in her ear. She was still pale; there were dark rings round her eyes.

Torn between conflicting emotions, he was at once enraged with her and full of pity. The thought, for instance,

that she had passed the night in another man's arms gave him a desire to kill her, and at the same time he longed to take her in his arms and weep over their common plight.

He heard the Negress talking endlessly; nobody tried to stem the flow of words. Perhaps they were glad of an excuse for deferring the moment of making a decision. He gazed at the old creature's shaven head, the long rubbery breasts, the skinny, knock-kneed shanks.

Though sometimes she tripped over a word, she never paused for breath, and one could see she was straining every nerve to make herself understood and carry conviction. She used none of the artifices of the European, never waxed emotional or raised her voice. Instead of shedding tears or showing signs of weakness she made it a point of honour to face her hearers statue-still.

The voice would have sounded mechanical, inhuman, but for its intonation, which was that of an indifferent lay-reader plodding through the Lessons. All the syllables sounded much alike and, unless one gave close attention, came to seem no more than incoherent noise, like the patter of raindrops on a window.

Her interminable monologue set Timar's nerves on edge; it had the same effect on him as certain lullabies still sung by nurses in French country villages, which sound less soothing than malevolent, like evil incantations. And all the time not a muscle of the black face stirred, and more and more clearly he glimpsed beyond it that other, younger face turning towards him as the dug-out swerved from the river-bank, and the girl's shy, unfinished gesture of farewell.

Other pictures rose to his mind, and he was amazed at their clarity of detail. The twelve pairs of eyes focused on him as the paddles flashed and fell, and through the golden

air there rose the boatmen's song, monotonous and mournful like this woman's voice. And the hang-dog look on the men's faces when they had collided with the sunken snag and he lost his temper.

He had twinges of pain in his chest, due perhaps to hunger or to thirst. His knees were shaking with the strain of standing on tiptoe. Suddenly a wild idea came to him of shouting like the others: 'Stop her! That's enough of it!'

But just as he was opening his mouth the Judge tinkled his absurd little bell. Failing to understand, the woman raised her voice a tone and went on doggedly with her monologue. The interpreter said something, and her voice went up another tone, and now there was despair in it. But she still made no gesture.

Timar was reminded of the *Parce, Domine* sung in churches in time of trouble, which is repeated thrice by the congregation, on three different notes, rising a tone each time.

Now her voice was high-pitched, and she was talking faster. She wanted to tell everything. Everything!

'Take her out!'

Some native police in blue uniforms led the woman out through the crowd. Did she know why she had been brought here, why so suddenly ordered out? She offered no resistance and went on with her monologue, unheeded, as they took her away.

Just then Timar caught Adèle's eye and saw a look of undisguised terror on her face. He had no idea that what scared her was his own appearance. All the exertions of the last few days, the heat, illness, exhaustion, had left their imprint, and he was looking ghastly. His eyes were bright

with fever and shifting incessantly from the Negroes to the whites, from the clock to the brown smudge on the wall.

Drenched in cold sweat, gasping for breath, he was as little able to fix his thoughts on anything as to control his eyes. And just now he felt a desperate need to *think*, to set order in the chaos of his mind.

'Tell us briefly what she said. Briefly, mind you! It sounded fine! Well?'

'She says it isn't true.'

The interpreter seemed full of himself, conscious of his importance. There were some murmurs at the windows. The Judge rang his bell imperiously.

'Keep quiet, or I shall clear the Court.'

Two other Negroes stepped forward, unsummoned, to the place where previous witnesses had stood. The Judge, who had calmed down already, leaned forward, his elbows resting on the table, and asked:

'Do you speak French?'

'Yes, Massa.'

'What reason have you to believe that Amami killed Thomas?'

'Yes, Massa.'

These two were evidently witnesses for the prosecution. And now Timar understood everything. He did more than understand; he visualized the whole sequence of events from the day he had left Libreville. While he was gazing at the Negro girl on the river-bank Adèle had gone to the headman's hut, offered him a handsome sum if he would fix Thomas's murder on one of the villagers, and made over to him the revolver.

The rest was all plain sailing. The headman picked on a villager against whom he had a grudge, a man who had

married his daughter and when she left him had dared to insist on the dowry being refunded. There had been a dispute about some goats and hoes. Five hoes, to be precise. ...

These two witnesses had been promised bribes, no doubt, and were doing their simple best to earn them.

'Yes, Massa.'

'That's not what I want! Tell me, when did you first hear that Amami killed Thomas?'

'Yes, Massa.'

Losing patience, the Judge rapped out :

'Interpreter, translate the question.'

There followed a confabulation in the native language which, as it showed no sign of ending, the Court cut short. Imperturbable as ever, the interpreter announced :

'Your honour, he says Amami has always been considered a bad lot.'

Deadlock again! Though his wife had been sent away, Amami had stayed in the courtroom. He was staring dully at his accusers, sometimes trying to put in a word, only to be shut up promptly. He had lost what little grip he had ever had of what was happening.

Was the Negress Timar had slept with really this man's daughter? He blushed now at the thought that she had been a virgin, and that all the same he had possessed her, in a sort of blind rage, with a crazy idea that by so doing he was taking his revenge on this whole damned continent of Africa!

'Is that the revolver found in his hut?' The Judge pointed to the weapon lying on the table.

Timar was conscious of Adèle's gaze intent on him; also that of the others: Bouilloux, the fat clerk, the one-eyed man.

Being unable to see his own face, he could not realize why, crucial as the moment was, Bouilloux suddenly started pushing his way towards him through the mass of natives. He did not even realize that the Negroes near him were eyeing him with alarm. His breath came in wheezy gasps like those of a man in a high fever, his hands were so tightly locked that the finger-joints were cracking.

'Both of them swear that that is the revolver found in Amami's hut. All the witnesses give the same evidence. No European has visited the village since the crime took place.'

The old Negro was gazing at the interpreter with terrified, imploring eyes. He, too, had a faint likeness to the girl, though his skin was greyish-black and wizened like the old woman's.

The clerk and the man beside him watched Bouilloux forcing his way towards Timar. On the other side of the rope, the official side, the Prosecutor was bending towards Adèle. They were whispering together and casting furtive glances at Timar.

Suddenly a hand gripped Timar's arm. A voice said in his ear :

'Be careful!'

Why should he be careful? Careful of what, or whom? And then a queer sensation came over Timar; it lasted only a few seconds, but it left him sick with horror. He had identified himself with the miserable Negro, he *was* that half-naked old creature standing at bay with everybody's hand against him, beset and baited by the pack.

They were after him too! Bouilloux had been sent to bring him to heel. The vice-like grip was tightening on his arm.

Adèle and the Prosecutor were still watching him. Even

the Judge looked round with an apprehensive air as though he, too, had scented trouble. But he merely took another sip of whisky.

Had that poor devil of a Negro the same sensations, the same despair as Timar? Did he, too, feel ringed round by enemies; all these hodies, black and white alike, closing in on him, crushing out his life? Perhaps he did, for all at once he started speaking across the tumult in a high-pitched, whimpering voice, repeating the story that nobody had troubled to listen to.

Though Bouilloux's fingers were boring into his flesh, though Adèle was gazing anxiously at him and the Prosecutor observing him with a curious smile, Timar could restrain himself no longer. He drew himself up to his full height, swung himself up on to his toes, and, though every word rasped in his throat, his voice rose to a scream.

'It's a lie! It's a damned lie! He is innocent. It was ... Yes, he had to come out with it. Cost what it might, this nightmare must be ended. 'It was *she* who killed that boy. And you know it as well as I do!'

Bouilloux twisted his arm, gave a sharp tug, and laid him sprawling amongst the black men's feet.

CHAPTER XIII

Retreat

He guffawed, and said aloud :

'Obviously! There's no such thing!'

Two passengers looked round. He returned their stare with a contemptuous shrug of his shoulders. More damned

officials! Let them think what they liked! The steamer was getting under way. Timar was sitting in the smoke-room aft of the first-class promenade-deck.

Suddenly he jumped up. He had just realized that he was seeing for the last time in his life that yellow band of fore-shore, those dark bastions of jungle, red roofs and feathery palms.

His eyes were unnaturally bright, his features twitching; but it had become a habit with him to make faces, wring his hands, and mutter to himself even when others were near.

'Now, I wonder who was it brought me to the train?'

He knew it was an absurd thing to say: that there's no station at Libreville, no one had come to see him off, no handkerchief had fluttered towards him from the quay. Yet 'train' was definitely the right word, with its associations of good-byes, La Rochelle station, his mother and sister.

He had been very ill. So they had kept on telling him, and very likely it was true. As a result of being beaten up, of course. Never before had Timar been involved in any brawl, least of all in public. He was a well-brought-up young man, of a naturally peaceful temperament.

But when Bouilloux had started wrenching his arm in the midst of that surging crowd, he had seen red and lashed out blindly. He had felt that they were all against him. There had been a general mêlée of blacks and whites, and then the whole lot of them had been hustled out on to the road. Someone had kicked him in the face, drawing blood. His sun-helmet had rolled away. The sun had blazed down on his head.

Sometimes he had seen street-fights, but he had never

taken part in one. Usually he gave them a wide berth. But in this one he had been the central figure. He had learnt that blows hurt less than one supposes, and no great courage is needed to put up a fight. Was everyone against him? Well, he'd show them that he, too, could use his fists! Which he did until, without a notion how he'd got there, he found himself in the semi-darkness of the police station.

He had recognized at once those familiar stripes of light and shadow on the floor and walls, the table on which drinks were served. He was seated, and the Superintendent pacing to and fro, scrutinizing him in an odd way which puzzled Timar. Passing his hand over his forehead, he murmured uncomfortably :

'I'm awfully sorry. I can't quite remember what happened. They were all against me, you know.' He conjured up a would-be tactful smile.

The Superintendent, however, did not smile, but went on watching him with the same steady, hostile stare.

'Want something to drink?' he asked in the tone he would have used to a nigger or a dog, and gave him a glass of water only. Then started pacing up and down the room again.

Timar rose from his chair.

'Stop!'

'What are we waiting for?' Everything still seemed rather blurred; he would not have been surprised to find it all a dream.

'Sit down,' the Superintendent said.

It struck Timar that the man hadn't troubled to answer his question, and once more he had a vague impression of being trapped, the victim of a plot.

'Come in, doctor. How are you? I suppose you know

what's happened?' The Superintendent cast a meaning glance towards Timar.

'What will you do about him?' the doctor asked under his breath.

'We shall have to put him under arrest. After such scandalous behaviour ...'

The doctor turned to Timar and remarked :

'So it's you who caused all the rumpus this morning?' His tone was as unamiable as the police officer's.

While speaking, he had pushed up Timar's eyelids and peered into his pupils. After feeling his pulse for less than five seconds, he cast a comprehensive glance over the young man from head to foot and muttered :

'By Jove!'

He turned to the Superintendent.

'Come outside for a moment, will you.'

They conversed in whispers on the verandah. The police officer returned, scratching his head, and shouted to a boy :

'Put me through to Government House.'

He picked up the receiver.

'Hullo? Yes, sir. it's as we supposed. Exactly. Shall I send him in a car? In any case, I'll have had to do so, as feelings are running high against him amongst the timber traders. Will you be there, sir?'

He picked up his helmet and said to Timar :

'Come along.'

Timar followed, surprised at his own docility. He had lost all power of reacting; never would he have believed it possible to feel so tired, such a void in his head and body. He followed the Superintendent into the porch of the hospital, without even wondering why he was being taken there. The Governor's car had already arrived. In a

spotlessly clean room, the first such room he had seen since coming to Africa, he found the Governor waiting, and held out his hand. The Governor ignored it, and said curtly:

'I wonder if you realize, young man, what you have done?'

No, to tell the truth, he didn't realize it – or only in the vaguest way. There had been a 'rough house'. He had listened to a Negro and Negress droning out some rigmarole in a stifling room, with Adèle in the offing staring at him, trying to overawe him.

'Have you any money?'

'I believe I have some left in the bank.'

'In that case, let me give you a word of advice. There's a boat for France in two days' time. Take a passage on it.'

Timar began to protest. With an attempt at dignity, he said:

'I'd like to tell you, sir, about this ... this business about Adèle. ...'

'That can wait. Go to bed now.'

The Governor and the Superintendent had left the hospital together. The manner of both had been distant, not to say contemptuous. Timar had gone to sleep. He had had a bout of high fever, acute pains in his head. He kept on saying to the male nurse:

'It's this damned little bone at the base of my skull that hurts. Why don't you attend to it?'

Somehow there did not seem to have been any intermediate stage between his going to hospital and coming on board the *Foucault*. Still, he remembered that the Superintendent had come to visit him twice. Timar had asked if he could see Adèle.

'Better not.'

'What does she say?'

'Nothing.'

'And the doctor? He thinks I'm mad, doesn't he?'

That was what vexed him most. He realized he must look like a madman, yet he knew quite well he wasn't! Of course he made grimaces and, now and then, crazy gestures. Sometimes, too, he found his head buzzing with mad ideas.

'There's no such thing.'

But he wasn't mad. That was obvious; for he felt quite calm, quite composed. He did his packing unaided. He even noticed that his white suits were missing and insisted on their being looked for, as he knew that everyone on board ship wore white as far as Teneriffe.

On the quay at seven in the morning, when only his coolies were with him, he had chuckled to himself as he gazed at the red road and the line of palm trees etched upon the brightness of the sky.

'There's no such place.'

Obviously, in a sense, it existed – but he knew what he meant. Just as he knew that all this was only a passing phase. So there was no need to feel ashamed about it.

He had gone on board the tender. Suddenly he had buried his head in his hands, murmuring: 'Adèle!' He gritted his teeth. Peering between his fingers, he could see the Negroes grinning. The sea was smooth.

All that was ended, Africa out of sight.

The bar steward came up to him.

'Did you call me, sir?'

'An orangeade, please.'

By the way the man looked at him Timar knew the steward, too, thought him mad. Probably the ship's officers had been told about him.

'There's no such place.'

A train. What train? Ah, yes, the La Rochelle train; his sister waving her handkerchief. Slumped in a wicker chair, he let his thoughts drift on. His tropical suits had not been found; he was in black. But really he enjoyed being different from the other passengers. The boat was swarming with army officers. 'Too many damned uniforms,' Timar grumbled. And too many Civil Servants. And too many children rushing about the promenade-deck.

What did it bring back to him? Why, of course — Adèle. She, too, always wore black. But she, of course, had no children. and nothing under her dress. Whereas the black girl wore no dress. Naked and unashamed!

Yes, he could remember everything. Perfectly well. He wasn't the simpleton they thought him, not by a long way! They'd wanted to convict the father of that Negro girl. But Timar had stood up for him. Then they had beaten him up. The whole crowd had turned on him.

Of course it was a plot. They were all in it. The Governor, the Prosecutor, Bouilloux and his gang. For, of course, Adèle had kept open bed to all of them!

White clad passengers were pacing indefatigably up and down the deck, killing time.

'Murder? There's no such thing.'

And suddenly the thoughts that had been racing through his brain slowed down, almost to a standstill. An all but lucid interval. He saw himself, a black figure with a sun-helmet pushed well back, seated in the smoke-room of a liner. Homeward bound.

Evidently he'd had some nasty knocks on the head. It had been a near thing he had not lost his reason. In fact, people thought him mad. But he'd get over it. So sure of

that he felt that he kept on postponing the moment of recovery, when he would have to think straight all the time. It was a knack one could acquire at will – thinking straight.

He closed his eyes and watched a pageant of mind-pictures, all slightly out of focus, as in dreams, stream past. He listened to his thoughts. Dusk was falling. Four men, Civil Servants by their looks, were playing cards at a nearby table, and drinking Pernod. As it had been at Libreville, at Adèle's. He had learnt the game they were playing. An easy game; he'd picked it up at once. The picture faded out into another. Another night some weeks later. They were approaching the concession. In a launch. He'd had a sudden attack. Struggled, laid about him with his fists. They had put him to bed. ...

Adèle was lying, naked, at his side. They were spying on each other in the darkness, feigning sleep. Then he, Timar, had fallen really asleep and she had taken advantage of it, to slip away. So next morning – no Adèle!

That Negro girl had been a virgin.

'There's no such thing.'

He opened his eyes. A young lieutenant was passing, with his sun-helmet on, though night had fallen. Another officer, a captain, called to him from the card table:

'Afraid of catching moon stroke?'

Timar swung round abruptly. Moon stroke? He'd heard someone use that expression before – when was it? When he was in bed – or was it during the fight? What's more, it had been said in just the same bantering tone. He glared at the officer aggressively, as if he expected an explanation or apology.

The card-players consulted together, then rose to their feet.

"Time to change, isn't it?"

Timar's eyes followed them suspiciously as they walked off.

At dinner he had a table to himself. He felt absolutely calm, though occasionally he chuckled, when he saw people casting sympathetic glances in his direction. Now and then he would deliberately utter some words half aloud. There was a girl at one of the other tables who seemed to find this funny, and it amused him to see her holding her napkin before her face to hide her giggles.

What did it matter anyhow? He knew so well this was a passing phase. Like the tide. There comes an hour, inevitably, when even the highest tide begins to turn. That was a law of nature.

The pictures forming before his eyes were steadily growing more clean-cut, less entangled one with the other. Except at night. Twice he woke with a cry, sitting up in his bunk, drenched in sweat, quivering in every limb, and groping in the bed for Adèle. But that, of course, wasn't the same thing. Everything is different at night. And Adèle wasn't there — or rather she *was* there but he could not reach her and bury his aching brows upon the softness of her breast.

To make things worse, the Negro girl was beside him in the bed. Inert, submissive. ... An awkward situation; he'd have to find a way out — perhaps go away, far away, with Adèle.

To stop all this damned gossip. To have done with Africa, the Gabun, timber concessions and the rest of it. Let the Negroes keep their damned okume log, and Constantinesco run the business!

Only Adèle counted. Adèle in the moist warmth of the

bed, in the brindled twilight of the morning hours. When she'd gone downstairs, he would listen to the morning voices below, the boy cleaning out the restaurant while Adèle wrote up her account-books at the cash-desk.

It was the ship's doctor who waked him, a silly young man who deemed it necessary to make friendly conversation.

'I'm told we hail from the same parts, Monsieur Timar. Quite interesting, isn't it?'

'Where's your home?'

— 'La Pallice.'

'That's not the same place.'

Only two miles from La Rochelle — but two miles were two miles, or weren't they? Not to mention that the fellow had a half-wit's face and ugly, bulging eyes. It seemed he wanted to know how Timar was feeling. Well, he was feeling calm.

'Had a good night?'

'Rotten.'

'Sorry to hear that. I'll bring you along a medicine to ...'

'There's no such thing.'

Damn them all! Why couldn't they leave him in peace? That was all he asked for, to be left alone! He didn't want people fussing over him. Least of all, doctors. Didn't they know that he was cleverer than all the doctors in the world?

Cleverer than he himself was in the past. For now he had developed a sixth — was it a seventh? — sense. He perceived things that were too subtle for the ordinary run of people. He could even forecast the future; for instance, the visit that their family doctor would pay him in their villa at La Rochelle. He, too, affected a hearty manner.

'Well, old chap, what's the trouble? Tell us all about it!'

His mother and sister would be fluttering round the bed.

In the passage the doctor would whisper to them as he went away :

'Rest is all he needs. He'll get over it.'

Why not? Then they'd coddle him. Then start talking to him again about his cousin Blanche, who lived at Cognac. One Sunday she'd turn up in a new pink dress.

Let them have their way. They wanted him to marry her; he'd do so. Just to have some peace. He'd accept the job that had been offered to him, at the oil-refinery. At La Pallice, as it happened. In the part of the town where rows and rows of workmen's houses had been run up, a hundred yards from the sea. He, of course, would have a bigger house, with a garden, of the seaside villa type. And a motor-cycle. He'd settle down, make quite a good husband. A peaceful life. Never had he wanted that so much. Why, he might even consent to have children!

Those people who walked past him on the promenade-deck or in the music room couldn't guess, of course, that he'd developed a sixth sense; but they looked back in a startled way, he noticed, and lowered their voices.

What did they matter, anyhow?

How wonderful, absolutely superb, was that moment when the twelve paddles rose together and for the fraction of a second the boatmen held their breath, their eyes fixed on the white man; then with a deep concerted grunt brought down the blades into the water, while straining muscles rippled in the light, and dusky bellies buckled! New beads of sweat shone on the sleek black bodies, cataracts of water-drops were falling through the bright air, strings of rainbow-tinted pearls.

But it wouldn't be the least use talking about that. Nobody would understand. Certainly not the fellows at his

office in La Pallice. Least of all Blanche – who was a really pretty girl.

‘There’s no such thing.’

His eyes encountered the deck steward’s. The man was smiling.

‘Feeling better, Monsieur Timar?’

‘Much better.’

‘Going on shore at Kote?’

‘On shore? There’s no –’

The steward said with

‘Anything to drink, sir?’

‘An orangeade, why not?’

you know. Anyhow – there’s no such.

But he didn’t really mean it. There were moments when that when, completely calm and lucid, he saw things in the bleak light of reality.

But that was just what he must avoid. For the present anyhow. Or else ... Why, he might even on a sudden impulse jump overboard! That, too, was something to be avoided.

With a faint hiss the bows cut through the grey-blue smoothness. The smoke-room verandah was in shadow. A sailor was giving a fresh coat of red paint to the interior of the wind-scoops.

Timar resolved to make himself agreeable. With Blanche, with everyone at La Rochelle and La Pallice. He’d come to the wharf to see the liners bound for Africa, watch young men and Civil Servants going on board.

But he wouldn’t say anything. Not a word. Only once in a while, at night, he’d have his moon-stroke – an ‘attack’ they would call it – and once again would feel his senses swooning in the sultry air and, in a waking dream,